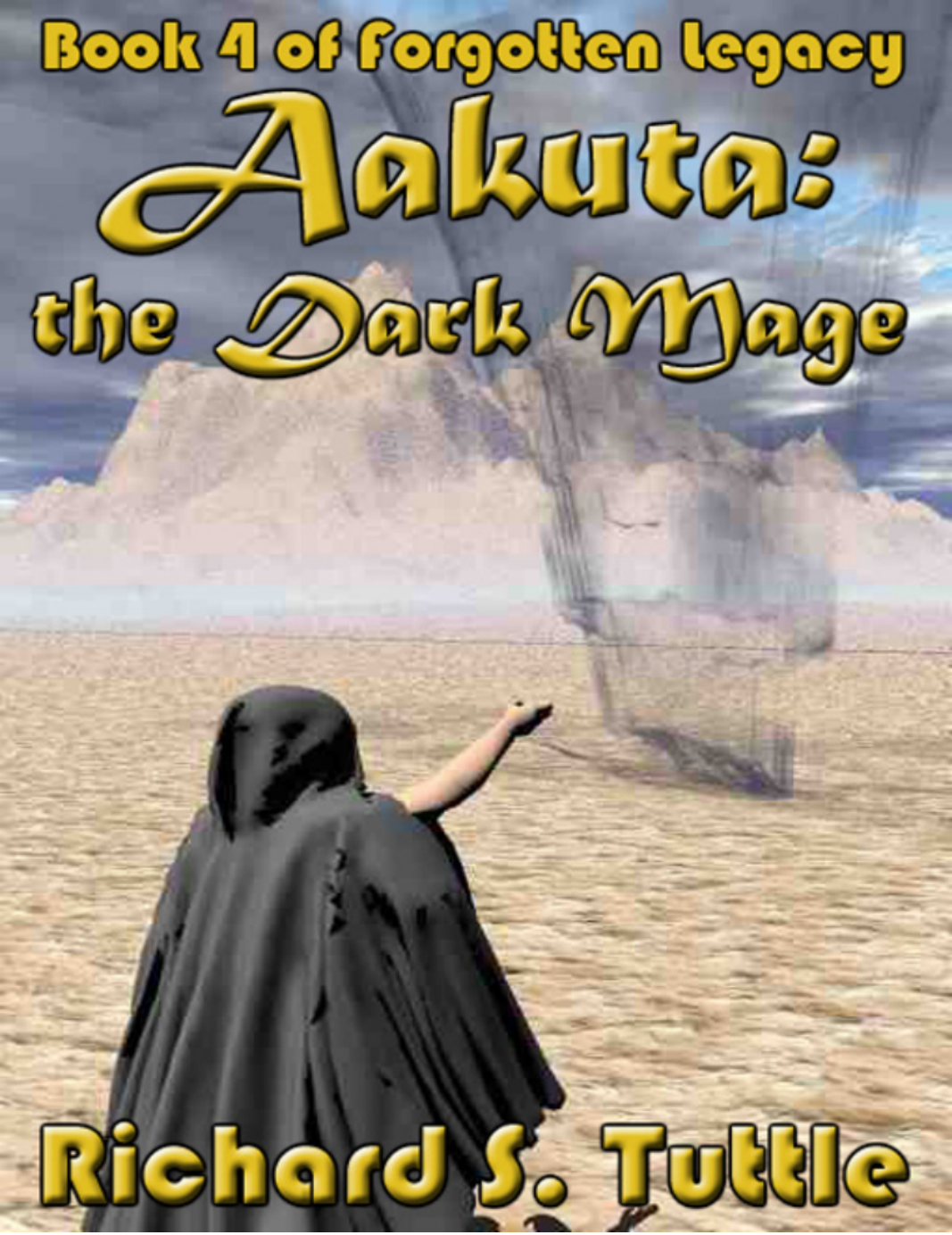
Book 4 of Forgotten Legacy
Aakuta:
the Dark Mage
Richard S. Tuttle

SHOUT
SHARE
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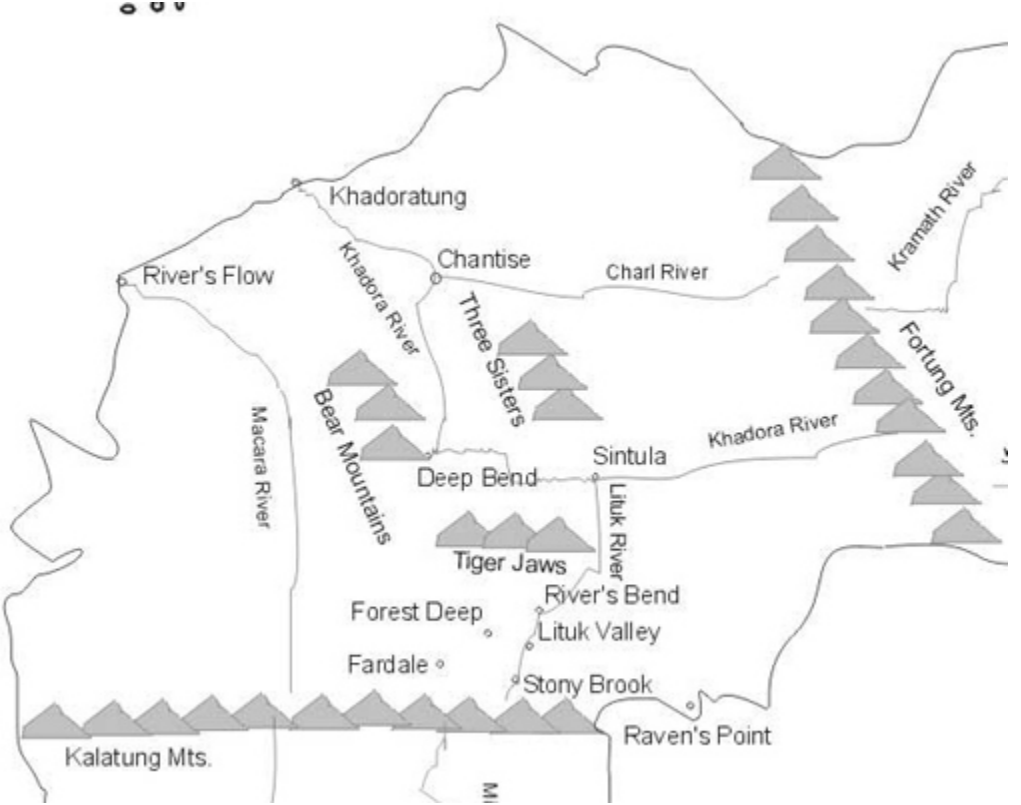
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Richard S. Tuttle

Aakuta: the Dark Mage

Prologue

Khador halted his horse atop the small rise and dismounted. He gazed westward towards the mouth of the mighty river and the ocean beyond. As his eyes surveyed the fertile valley, he began to nod appreciatively.

"What are we searching for?" asked one of his generals as the vanguard of Khador's army halted behind him.

"We are no longer searching," Khador replied with a smile upon his lips. "Look at the mouth of this river. What do you see?"

"A wide delta," shrugged the general. "The river is wide enough to provide a defensive border for one side of our troops should we be attacked, but that is not likely. The Chula are running from our army, not seeking to confront it. They will be exterminated completely before long."

"Must you always be a soldier, General?" Khador shook his head. "We have not come to this land just to exterminate the Chula. We have come to found a civilization. Look at the fertile valley below us. It is the finest land that we have seen since coming to this accursed place."

"You plan to make camp here for some time then?" asked the general.

"Not a camp," corrected Khador, "a country. This valley will become Khadoratung, the capital city of our country of Khadora. Every piece of land between the Fortung Mountains and the Kalatung Mountains will be ruled from this valley. This is where Khadora will be governed from."

"From here?" questioned the general. "Why such a remote area? I can see the valley is fertile, but we will be far removed from your brothers."

"Brother you mean," scowled Khador. "Only Omung lives now, and his people will settle the land south of the Kalatung Mountains. North of the Kalatung Mountains is my land."

"And Fakar's army?" asked another general.

"Fakar's army must stay east of the Fortung Mountains," declared Khador. "Nobody lives in Khadora that is not subjected to my rule."

"Are we to stop them from coming to Khadora then?" asked the first general.

"Certainly," nodded Khador. "Traders may cross the mountains to sell their wares, but this land is mine. There will be no migration allowed. How Omung handles his people and his land is up to him, but I plan to make sure the Khadora is the most secure nation of them all."

“That could lead to fighting with the men from Fakara or Omunga,” frowned the general. “Are you sure this is wise?”

“It is necessary,” stated Khador as his brow creased in frustration. “I cannot remember what has caused us to flee our homeland, but the terror will seek us out. That is why this valley is perfect for our capital. It is as far away from everyone as it can be. Here we will build our city and set the course for our future. The highest-ranking generals will be gifted land around the new city. Others will also be gifted land, but as their rank decreases, the distance from their land to the capital will increase. The lowest ranking will receive their land near the Fortung Mountains or the Kalatung Mountains. They will be our border defenses.”

“So the more loyal the troops, the closer they are to protect you,” the general nodded appreciatively.

“Exactly,” affirmed Khador. “Also the size of the grants will dwindle as the distance from Khadoratung increases. Those who have proven their loyalty to me will be amply rewarded.”

“And those less loyal will be spread out over great distances and unable to pose much of a threat to your rule,” nodded the general. “I can see that you have thought on this subject for some time. What is to stop those clans on our borders from conspiring with others across the mountains?”

“They will not be able to conspire without us knowing of it,” Khador said. “The first law of Khadora will make lying a grievous offense. Any person who is caught in a lie will forfeit his life. This will be the law of Khadora. I have chosen six among the most loyal of the generals. Those six will form a council of lords to enforce the law and settle disputes. I, as the emperor, will have the final say on all matters. Together, our armies will ensure that the laws of Khadora are obeyed.”

“There will be grumbling when only six are chosen to be above the rest,” sighed the general.

“Each clan shall be headed by a lord,” smiled Khador. “Each lord shall have a seat in a national assembly. Its powers will be minimal, but it will give them a sense of participation. In the future the assembly of lords shall choose who sits on the Lords’ Council. The lesser clans will believe that they actually have a say in how the country is governed. That will keep the rabble quiet.”

“In reality,” grinned the general, “it will always be the strongest of us to rule the land. Our armies will ensure that. The rest of the lords will squabble amongst themselves.”

“Precisely,” declared Khador, “and in the future, the six shall choose the emperor. Together our seven clans will rule Khadora forever. See to your men, General. In the morning we begin to create a

new country.”

Chapter 1

Karnic

Netura's eyes scanned the sides of the road in a continuous motion. He was aware of the Three Sisters Mountains rising sharply off to the right, but he did not allow the scenery to distract him from his duty, even though he had never been this far north before. The young Torak soldier was excited to have been chosen to guard the caravan on its way to Chantise, as he had never been to a large city before, but he also realized that the previous two caravans had failed to show up in Khadora's second largest city. He vowed to guard the valuable shipment and enjoy the scenery on the trip back home.

Netura saw the squad leader signal for him to come forward. He passed three wagons loaded with golden ripe watula and a squad of black-clad soldiers escorting them until he was riding alongside Hira. The two soldiers rode in silence for several long minutes before the squad leader spoke.

"Netura," Hira said, "it is getting late in the day. I want you to ride ahead and find a suitable spot to make camp for the night. Remember what I taught you. Choose a location that is easily defendable and where our sentries can be concealed. Also choose a location where wires can be strung during the night to alert us to any intruders."

"Are you expecting trouble during the night?" asked Netura.

"I always expect trouble," sighed Hira. "You must learn to do the same. All day I have had a nagging feeling that today is the day we will be attacked. I cannot logically explain the feeling, but it is making me nervous."

Netura's eyebrow rose as he gazed at the squad leader. Hira was known by everyone to be confident even under the greatest stress, so his admission unnerved Netura.

"I have detected nothing so far," Netura offered sheepishly.

"I have not detected anything either," admitted Hira. "Still, the other two squads had far more experience escorting caravans than we do, and they have not been heard from. I will rest easier when we arrive at Chantise."

Netura nodded and started moving ahead of the caravan, his eyes constantly shifting from side to side. He heard a slight whistle and turned to see Hira motioning him back to the caravan. He immediately obeyed.

“Was I making too much noise?” Netura asked nervously when he was once again riding alongside the squad leader.

“No,” Hira smiled weakly. “You were doing fine. You have learned your lessons well, Netura.”

“Then why did you recall me?” questioned Netura.

“The feeling,” the squad leader stated flatly. “Look, Netura, if we are attacked, I want you to avoid the battle.”

“Avoid the battle?” scowled Netura. “I could not walk away while my fellow soldiers are fighting. How can you ask this of me? It would be a violation of my Vows of Service.”

“It would not be a violation,” assured the squad leader. “You are under my command, and you shall do as I order. Caravans do not just disappear, Netura. The real danger in this mission is that we do not know what to expect. Part of me wants the attack to happen so that we can get word back to the estate about who our enemy is. I want you to be that messenger.”

“I am an able fighter,” protested Netura. “I am sure that we can repel any attackers.”

“We will do our best to defeat our enemies,” nodded Hira, “but I still want you to get word back to Lord Marak if anything goes wrong. It is important. Vow that you will carry that word if we are attacked.”

Netura rode silently for several minutes before finally nodding. “I vow to carry word of any attack to Lord Marak’s ears,” declared Netura.

“You’re a good lad, Netura,” smiled Hira. “Go and find us that secure location to camp for the night. Daylight is fast escaping us.”

Hira frowned as he watched Netura ride off. He knew that his orders had been like a slap across Netura’s face. No Torak soldier willingly walked away from a fight while his friends were in danger, but Hira knew that Netura had the best chance of evading an enemy if the need arose. The lad had a natural stealth to his movements, and the squad leader had promised the Lord Marshal that this caravan would not disappear without a clue as to why.

Squad Leader Hira pushed the thoughts from his mind as he watched Netura disappear around a bend in the road. He turned and let his eyes roam over the small caravan and the escorting soldiers. He smiled inwardly as he made eye contact with each member of his squad. They were all good lads, he thought to himself as he turned his attention to the road ahead. He tried to smile as he scanned the road ahead, but the feeling of doom clung to him, as it never had before.

Twenty minutes later, Hira knew that the feeling was genuine. The caravan had just rounded a bend in the road when he detected movement off to one side. The squad leader’s fingers instantly moved in what appeared to be a random fashion. The entire squad of Torak

soldier became instantly alert as the squad members recognized their leader's signal. Hands went automatically to hilts, and the soldiers nonchalantly maneuvered their horses alongside the wagons on the opposite side of the disturbance.

Suddenly, flaming arrows soared towards the caravan from both sides of the road. The Torak soldiers dismounted and drew their swords as the wagon drivers whipped the horses to speed them away from the attack. It was a move designed to take the prize away from the bandits while allowing the soldiers to counterattack. In normal circumstances, it would have worked well, but Hira instantly understood that he had been defeated. He jumped out of the way of the speeding wagons as they tried to escape.

"Take cover," Hira shouted. "They do not want the cargo. They want to destroy it."

Hira dove into a small gully that ran alongside the road. Some of the other squad members also dove for the gully, but most had already committed themselves to the fight by charging into the forest.

"Bows and throwing knives," shouted Hira. "They have no intention of coming to us. They plan to finish us off from the safety of the trees."

Hira turned and saw the three wagons of ripe grain engulfed in flames. The drivers' bodies littered the road. The horses ran frantically to escape the fires that were steadily devouring the wagons behind them. He turned his attention to the far side of the road where several of his squad had disappeared. He nocked an arrow to his bow and sought a target.

"I can't see a thing," snarled one of the Torak soldiers in the gully. "They are just gray shapes moving from tree to tree. No clan colors that I can see."

"Must be gray bandits," called another Torak warrior just before an arrow pierced his neck.

"These are not gray bandits," snarled Hira. "Bandits want to be paid for their work. They don't intentionally destroy a caravan. Besides, these men have worked together for a long time. You can tell by the lack of orders for the attack. Not a word has been heard since before the attack started. No, lads, we are facing a clan that doesn't want to show its colors."

"There will be no surrendering then," spat one of the Torak soldiers. "The cowards will want to kill us all."

"Certainly not," Hira agreed as he slid behind a large rock in the gully. "Their task is to destroy any trace of us before some traveler stumbles upon this fight. We only need to hold out for a while men. Keep them nervous with your arrows."

Even as Hira spoke, he heard the screams of his dying men. The

attackers tried lobbing arrows high into the air to pierce the men in the gully without risking their own lives.

"These bandits are cowards," shouted a Torak soldier. Why don't they come out of the woods and finish us?"

The soldier's words died in a gurgle as an arrow pierced his head. An eerie silence fell over the battlefield, and Hira realized that he was the only Torak soldier left alive. That was when he heard the first words spoken by the attackers.

"Is that it then?" one of the bandits asked.

"Shut up," growled another voice.

Hira's mind whirled around the question of why the bandits were acting so cowardly. They were good archers; the results of the ambush had proved that. Judging from the number of arrows that flew in the initial volley, Hira knew that there were at least two squads involved in the attack. Probably more. So why weren't they coming out of the forest to kill the survivors? If they wanted the caravan to disappear, they would need to clean up the attack site before someone stumbled across it. That should require a certain amount of haste on the part of the bandits, yet they remained hidden in the forest. Hira nocked another arrow to his bow and peered across the road for a target.

"They cannot afford to have one of their own slain," Hira mumbled under his breath. "They would have a hard time explaining the death to others on the estate they are from. That means that their task is hidden from even their own families."

Nodding to himself, Hira let his arrow fly into the forest even though he had no target to aim at.

"I must keep them engaged until a friendly squad of soldiers happens down this road," Hira said to himself.

Several arrows flew from the forest in answer to his, and Hira sheltered his head behind the large rock. At least two of the arrows hit the rock protecting him, verifying his evaluation of the skill of the bandit archers. The squad leader's eyes rose to watch the darkening of the sky as he wondered what the odds were of an army coming along the road. The road to Chantise was a fairly busy road, but Khadorans did not care much for night travel. Most trips were planned to end before sunset.

Hira thought about his own plans to stop for the night, and he frowned when he remembered Netura. The Torak soldier would be returning at any moment, the squad leader realized. Suddenly, he knew why the bandits were waiting patiently. They must have seen Netura ride on ahead, and they wanted him eliminated. Hira's head swiveled to look down the road. His eyes scanned the dimness of dusk as he searched for any sign of Netura. A lump formed in his throat when he saw Netura crawling slowly along the gully towards him.

Hira frowned and waved his arms towards Netura. He signaled the Torak soldier with his fingers and ordered him to retreat. Netura signaled back that he would circle around behind the bandits and distract them so that Hira could escape. Hira shook his head vigorously and repeated his order to retreat, but he knew that Netura would ignore his commands. Hira frantically sought a solution that would carry the word back to Lord Marak.

"Who are you?" Hira shouted to the bandits. "What do you want?"

Silence was the only answer that Hira received. He had not expected an answer, but he needed to draw attention away from Netura.

"I am the only one left," shouted Hira. "Will you accept my surrender?"

Hira already knew the answer to that question, but he wanted Netura to understand it as well. Silence hung in the air. Hira shot a glance towards Netura and saw the lad still approaching. Netura was still far enough away to escape if only he would. Once again Hira used his fingers to demand that Netura retreat. The Torak soldier ignored him.

"Ignore my order will you, lad?" Hira whispered to himself. "Well, you will not die today to save someone who is already dead. May the gods travel with you, my friend."

Hira nocked another arrow to his bow and stood up. He marched onto the road and stood defiantly for several seconds until the arrows soared out of the forest. Hira aimed at the source of the arrows and released the bowstring. His arrow was released just as he felt the first bite of metal piercing his chest. As his body fell to the road, Hira turned and gazed towards the distant Netura. He smiled inwardly as he saw the lad turn and scramble away.

* * *

The wind swept across the arid desolate plain, sending plumes of sand and dirt spiraling into the sky. It tore at the clothing of the lone rider leading the driverless caravan of six wagons, but it did not appear to bother the tall lanky man. His eyes did not deviate from his destination, as it grew larger on the horizon.

Karnic's face was calm and dispassionate, hiding the rage he felt inside. When the wind tore the hood from his head, exposing his short white hair and neatly groomed beard, Karnic casually waved his hand in the air before him. The windstorm suddenly parted, leaving the caravan to proceed through a corridor of still air. Karnic turned and looked at the six driverless wagons. The horses continued to plod along behind him as if ropes attached them to his horse. He nodded satisfactorily as he returned his attention to the pyramid before him,

as it grew steadily larger.

As Karnic approached the Vandegar Temple, his eyes surveyed the surrounding area. The place was devoid of the massive armies that were supposed to attack Khadora. His rage intensified as he viewed the remnants of what used to be a large army encampment. Cooking circles dotted the landscape. Makeshift corrals held no horses, and the forges sat cold and unused. Scraps of old cloth flew through the air, and weapon racks were empty and abandoned. Karnic's mouth opened slightly in a rare display of emotion as he bared his gritted teeth.

Karnic halted the caravan in front of the Vandegar Temple. He dismounted and waved his hand over the dozen horses pulling the wagons. With a final look at the desolate encampment, Karnic turned and strode up the steps of the temple, his long white robe swaying with his movement. He paused at the top of the steps and pulled his hood over his head and then stepped through the large entry doors.

He stopped inside the great doors to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the interior of the temple. His eyes narrowed as he viewed the debris scattered about the floor of the entrance hall. Walking silently, Karnic moved through the hall into the center room of the pyramid. The center of the pyramid was open to the apex and his eyes were automatically drawn upward to view the magnificence of the monument to Vand. He stood there for a long time, his eyes viewing the balconies of each level as he sought for any signs of life.

Karnic did not see anything but the leavings of the massive army that used to be housed there, but his ears did detect the sound of distant voices. Karnic scowled as the rage inside him grew to a fury. He headed to one of the stairways and started climbing upward. He walked quietly and let his ears guide him towards the voices. When he had climbed seven levels, Karnic turned along a corridor, the voices becoming decipherable. He listened to the conversation of the two men as he silently moved towards the speakers.

"I should kill you now," shouted Zygor. "Your actions have brought failure to our endeavors."

"My actions?" retorted Brakas. "You are the one who brought that cargo of poisoned fruit for Grulak to eat."

"I had not way of knowing what effects the fruit would have," snapped Zygor. "Remember that it was you who brought the fruit to me in the first place."

"Like yourself," countered Brakas, "I had no way of knowing its effects either. At least I tried to redeem myself by scattering the horses of that traitor General Winus. You merely hid here in the temple to see who would win."

Karnic paused outside the room as he heard a sword being pulled from its sheath.

“You think that sword will save you from my powers?” cackled Zygor. “You are a foolish man, Brakas.”

“Look, Zygor,” Brakas pleaded, holding his sword up for defense as he backed away from the magician, “There is no reason for us to quarrel. We are both committed to the same goal. If we work together, perhaps we can salvage this mission yet.”

“Salvage it?” screamed Zygor. “Our army is scattered all over Fakara. Worse, they have lost the leadership needed to make them into a viable fighting force. We will both be dead when Vand sends someone to find out what went wrong.”

Karnic chose that moment to clear his throat and step into the room. “Your display of emotion is unbecoming, Zygor,” Karnic declared as the two men in the room turned towards the new arrival.

“Karnic?” Zygor said hesitantly. “How long have you been listening?”

Brakas frowned as he gazed at Karnic. He still held his sword defensively in front of him and continued to edge further backwards.

“Put the sword away, Brakas,” Karnic commanded in a voice that left little doubt as to his feeling of superiority. He turned to Zygor and said, “I have heard enough to determine that our operation in Fakara has failed. Vand will not be pleased.”

Zygor opened his mouth to explain, but Karnic held up his hand to stifle the excuses. “I will hear no more bickering and excuses,” he stated sternly. “What I will hear is the state of our army here in Fakara.”

Karnic turned to glare at Brakas, and the Fakaran hesitated slightly before returning his sword to its sheath.

“We have no army,” Brakas stated nervously. “The free tribes have scattered them across the breadth of Fakara.”

“He speaks the truth,” admitted Zygor. “The free tribes have aligned with the Astor. Grulak and Veltar are both dead.”

“Grulak is of no consequence,” replied Karnic, “and Veltar has been rewarded for his failure.”

“Of no consequence?” frowned Brakas. “He was the leader that a hundred thousand followed. Nobody can replace him. The army is gone.”

“Never tell me what cannot be done,” Karnic spat as he fixed his gaze on Brakas. “Grulak was a fool, but a useful one. His life brought us the Time of Calling. His death cost us nothing. We do not need a hundred thousand men to bring chaos to Khadora. The task can be accomplished with much less.”

“You plan to continue the attack on Khadora?” questioned Zygor.

“No,” smiled Karnic, “I have plans for you to conquer Khadora. My services are needed in Omunga.”

“It is not possible,” interjected Brakas. “We could never get a quarter of the men that Grulak had amassed.”

“You need even less than that,” declared Karnic. “We have three clan lords in Khadora that have agreed to work with us. Do you know of them, Zygor?”

“I do,” Zygor nodded. “They agreed for their own selfish reasons, though. I believe they planned to use Grulak as a distraction to gain more power for themselves. I warned him about that.”

“We do not care about their reasons for cooperating,” Karnic said. “We are changing the agreements made with them, and the terms are not negotiable.”

“What do you wish for me to do?” asked Zygor, feeling relieved that he was not going to be executed for his failures.

“I have brought a caravan of food with me from Khadora,” explained Karnic. “Brakas will gather the former Jiadin warriors. The food will lure them in. You, Zygor, will visit these three lords in Khadora. You will change our agreements with them. Each of their estates will host five thousand Jiadin warriors. The Jiadin will wear the uniforms of the host clans.”

“So no one will know that the three groups are aligned,” Zygor nodded appreciatively.

“Precisely,” continued Karnic. “You will assume the leadership of a fourth clan. That estate will also host five thousand warriors under your direct command.”

“Assume?” frowned Zygor. “The clan lords of Khadora are very old men. Surely you know what you are asking of me?”

“No more than I am asking of myself,” nodded Karnic. “I will also assume a leader in Omunga to prepare for the Time of Cleansing.”

“But you are already old,” protested Zygor. “I have many years ahead of me yet.”

“You have given away your youth by your failure here in Fakara,” Karnic replied sternly. “Do you wish to refuse this order from Vand?”

Sweat broke out upon Zygor’s brow. He bit gently on his lip before bowing low before Karnic.

“I am most grateful for this opportunity to serve our master,” recited Zygor.

Brakas looked puzzlingly at the two magicians. He did not understand what horrors were alluded to by assuming a clan lord, but he knew that Zygor was fearful. He could smell the fear emanating from the young magician.

“How will we get these clan lords to accept five thousand Jiadin?” Brakas asked.

“Zygor will tell them to expect some new warriors to bolster their ranks prior to their expansion,” explained Karnic. “By the time they

realize the magnitude of the number of new warriors, it will be too late for them to do anything about it. The clan lords will be told to follow the instructions of the lord that Zygor chooses to assume."

"Still," Zygor interjected as he regained his composure, "twenty thousand men is not enough to conquer Khadora."

"You do not need to conquer the whole country," replied Karnic. "I have spent much time in Khadora since the Time of Calling began. We will use their own culture to defeat them, one small step at a time. Your four clans will slowly, but steadily, encroach upon your neighbors. When you devour an estate, annihilate the family of the clan lord and dissolve the clan. There will be no survivors to appeal to the Lords' Council. You will gobble up half the country before anyone thinks to object, and by that time it will be too late for them to object."

"You mean to grow the army by assimilating other clans?" nodded Brakas. "That is brilliant."

"It is perfection," nodded Karnic. "Brakas you will gather up the Jiadin that are required for this plan. Offer them whatever you wish. There will be gold aplenty when we descend on Khadoratung. In the meantime, there is food outside that you can use to gather the starving men."

"If the free tribes get wind of this," frowned Brakas, "they will come here and destroy our new armies."

"Then make sure that word does not pass to them," shrugged Karnic. "Move the men out as soon as they reach five thousand in number. Then start with the next recruitment group. Even if the free tribes find out, we will have only five thousand men at risk at any time. Also, order the first group of men to clean up this area. Vandegar Temple is a holy shrine. I will not see it desecrated with filth and garbage."

"It shall be as you command," declared Zygor. "How will I report our successes to you?"

"There will be no need to report to me," answered Karnic. "If you are successful, the world will know. And if you fail, you will not be alive to report. You will not find me in any event. I will be bringing chaos and mayhem to Omunga."

Zygor opened his mouth to offer some vague praise to Karnic, but the elder magician was no longer in the room. Zygor blinked and gazed about the room, but Karnic was gone.

"Did you see him leave?" Zygor whispered to Brakas.

"No," Brakas replied unsteadily. "What is this assuming that he talks about?"

"I have been ordered to take another's body," frowned Zygor. "It is irreversible. It is how Vand has managed to live for thousands of

years. When he ages, he assumes a fresh young body."

"And you can do that?" Brakas gasped. "Why then do you fear doing it when it means that you can live forever?"

"We can only do it once," replied Zygor. "Only Vand can do it multiple times. By assuming the body of an old man, I am shortening my lifespan. It is my punishment for failure here in Fakara."

"I think I would prefer dying," mused Brakas as he thought about being an old frail man.

"That is the only choice available to you," spat Zygor. "I am paying for my part in the failure here. You are not. Fail me again and you will surely beg for death, but that death will linger for an excruciatingly long time. Do not fail me again, Brakas."

Chapter 2

Torak and the Shaman

Marak flicked his wrist towards the target. A bright stream of light shot forth from his hand and streaked towards the vertical log. As the stream of light traveled, it flattened into a disc, and tendrils of light spread out from the center. The mass appeared much like a spinning disc with multiple blades of shiny steel rotating rapidly around the center. The disc struck the log with tremendous force. Chunks of bark and wood splinters flew through the air as the disc sped through the log. It was cleanly sawed in half, and Marak watched in amazement as the top portion of the log toppled over and fell to the ground.

"See how the disc disintegrated after cutting through the log?" smiled Ukaro. "If that was an enemy's body, it would have continued onward to strike what was behind it. You must learn to gauge the amount of force needed in any given situation. Sometimes you can use the spell to fell multiple foes. Other times you will prefer not to harm what is behind your enemy. You must practice this spell until you learn how to measure the force needed."

"Amazing," Marak muttered as he stared at the severed log. "I would not have believed that it would be so simple."

"It is not simple, son," replied the Chula shaman. "You have great power. Were you to live with the Chula, you would become a powerful shaman."

"Like you are," nodded Marak. "Sometimes I wish for nothing more than to do exactly that. Mother and you are so happy here."

"We are," grinned Ukaro, "but your path lies elsewhere, Marak. The Torak cannot walk away from his responsibilities."

"The Torak," frowned Marak. "I still do not have a clear idea what the Torak is, or what I am supposed to do."

Ukaro stared at his son, his split lips pressed tightly together. He absently brushed his golden mane away from his face and suddenly smiled.

"Come and sit with me by the lake," Ukaro said. "Enough practice for one day and you must return to your flatlanders in any event."

"I must, father," nodded Marak. "The Sakovans are preparing to leave for home, and I would be remiss if I was not there to bid them farewell."

The young lord of the Torak clan and his Chula father strode

across the open field and sat beside the lake. Marak gazed at his father's face. The shaman's face resembled the face of a lion. Long whiskers spread outward from above his split lips, and his mane was more than just long hair. It flowed from every portion of his face and head. His eyes sparkled with the clarity of a hunter.

"You still find my appearance strange," smiled Ukaro. "It can only be achieved by a powerful shaman. It demands respect within the Chula. You have the power to look like me, although I doubt your flatlanders would find it appealing."

"I suppose they would not accept it very well," Marak conceded. "Do you like looking that way?"

"I do," grinned Ukaro. "It is a constant reminder of who I am, but I do understand how others could find it discomforting."

"Perhaps when I am finished doing whatever it is that I must do," posed Marak, "I will live with the Chula and learn the ways of my ancestors."

"If you survive," frowned Ukaro. "Do not make light of what the Torak must endure. Your task will be fraught with danger."

"What is my task, father?" asked Lord Marak. "Tell me about the Torak."

"I think you already know much more than you let on," declared Ukaro. "The painting you saw in Angragar must have made you think about what god will require from you."

"God," mused Marak. "I grew up with the flatlanders, father. They speak of many gods, but value none of them."

"I understand," nodded the shaman, "but you have learned from your Sakovan friends that the one true god is Kaltara. Have you not?"

"Yes," agreed Marak, "but I know little about him. Why does this god put his favor on me? What makes him think that I can change the world?"

"He has chosen you, my son" Ukaro smiled proudly. "Do not question his motives. As to why he thinks you can change the world, he will endow you with what is necessary, and he will guide you. This you must believe with all your heart."

"So he will just make everything turn out all right?" questioned Marak.

"No, no," Ukaro shook his head vigorously, causing his mane to sway from side to side. "You must work hard to achieve his goals. By choosing you to be the Torak, he is giving all of humanity a chance to redeem itself, but only a chance. You must strive to make sure that you do not fail us. Another Torak may not come for thousands of years."

"So I can fail," pondered Marak. "What exactly is prophesized about this Torak?"

“Our scrolls state that the Torak will rise to reclaim our lands,” stated the shaman. “Most people believe that means that you will reclaim the land of the Chula from the flatlanders. It is said that you will destroy their armies and chase these invaders from our shores.”

“Most people believe that,” puzzled Marak. “I know you well enough to understand by your choice of words that you do not share that interpretation. What do you believe?”

“I used to believe as the others do,” explained Ukaro, “but hearing about your journeys to Sakova and Fakara has changed my perception of what must be done.”

“How has the telling of my travels changed your thinking?” inquired Marak.

“The painting in Angragar for one causes me to see things from a different perspective,” Ukaro continued. “It is clear that your future is tied to the Star of Sakova and the Astor of Qubari as they are pictured by your side in the painting.”

“I agree with that,” nodded Marak. “I have seen that painting many times in my dreams. It causes me to wonder what is to come.”

“I have spent many days since your return from Angragar going through the oldest of our archives,” stated Ukaro. “The invaders that came to our shores were fleeing from some great evil. There is nothing in our records to indicate what they were fleeing from, but I cannot help thinking that whatever was chasing them is what you must truly battle.”

Lord Marak nodded slowly as his mind drifted back to his short time in Angragar. They had found a scroll in the old temple that spoke of burning ships and searing minds.

“I believe you are correct,” declared Marak. “An old prophecy spoke of a great evil. It was an evil that defied Kaltara thousands of years before the invaders came. The evil was banished from the land to a new land. I suspect the invaders came from that new land. I think they were fleeing from that evil.”

“That would explain the great fear that pervaded the invaders,” mused Ukaro. “The histories tell much about the trials of my people during the invasion. The invaders were skilled warriors, much greater than anyone who lived here. They certainly were not cowards and did not shy from battle, but they were driven by fear of something chasing them. Our records offer no hint as to what that evil was.”

“One of the Qubari suspected that the great evil was a priest named Vand,” offered Marak. “Vand declared himself a god and gathered a great host of followers. Legend states that he defied the other gods and was banished to some unknown land.”

“Then the pieces fall into place,” sighed Ukaro.

“How?” Marak shook his head. “This all happened thousands of

years ago. Some priest who thought he was a god would not be alive today to bother us."

"Can you be sure of that?" questioned the shaman. "You already know of many things that defy what is supposedly known to be true. The flatlanders believe that magicians can only be female. An untruth. They believe that slavery is necessary for the survival of their economy. A lie. You were told that nobody ever escapes the Qubari jungle, yet here you are. Do not be so quick to rule out an old priest as the source of the evil that will plague you. Even if this Vand no longer lives, the evil that lived within him might still exist."

"All right," shrugged Marak. "The prophecy stated that the people of his new land would flee from him. It states that they will burn their ships and sear their minds, whatever that means."

"I will tell you what it means," the shaman said. "The invaders that came to our shores so long ago burned their ships upon arrival. It made no sense to the Chula of that age, but it was recorded, so it is true. I have read all of the histories from that time. There is little in them except the harrowing tales of brutal slaughter, but I do recall reading one that spoke of captured invaders. I said before that the invaders were afraid of something, but that we never found out what it was. One of the scrolls suggested that the invaders did not know what they were fleeing because their memories were destroyed."

"Do you mean intentionally erased?" asked Marak.

"The scroll did not make that judgment," shrugged Ukaro, "but if it was intentional, would not that be a searing of minds?"

"It would," nodded Marak. "Is that possible? Do you know of magic that can block a memory?"

"No," admitted Ukaro, "but that does not make it impossible. Tell me more of this scroll you found in Angragar."

"It mentioned that the searing magic would fail because of intermarriage and that the evil would be summoned because of that failure," Marak continued. "The scroll called this the Time of Calling. It is during this Time of Calling that Kaltara will send forth the Torak, the Star of Sakova, and the Astor. The three of us are to gather the faithful and the faithless to stand against the evil in the Time of Cleansing."

"When is the Time of Cleansing?" interrupted the shaman.

"It starts when the evil arrives," answered Marak. "That is all the scroll stated."

"So you are to gather the faithful AND the faithless," mused Ukaro. "The faithless to me are the flatlanders. I feel more strongly than ever that what the others expect of the Torak is not what is required of you. If you were here merely to reclaim our land from the flatlanders, then why did Kaltara send the Star and the Astor?"

“They each have their own lands to reclaim,” Marak offered weakly.

“Perhaps that is how others will interpret it,” shrugged Ukaro, “but I see both of them as being among the faithful. It is the Khadorans, the Omungans, and the Fakarans that are the faithless. It is not referring to the Chula, the Sakovans, and the Qubari. They could never be considered faithless. We have lived for many generations waiting for you to come. We have not wavered in our faith.”

“So I am to make allies with the flatlanders in all three countries?” Marak questioned skeptically.

“It would appear so,” nodded Ukaro.

“Impossible,” Marak shook his head. “The Khadorans will kill me. It is only a matter of time before they do, but I am sure that they will succeed. In any event, there is absolutely no chance that the Khadorans would ever agree to follow me.”

“Come,” Ukaro smiled as he rose. “It is time for you to leave the Chula and return to your flatlanders. Have you found a mate a yet?”

Lord Marak rose and stared at his father with his mouth hanging open.

“A mate?” he echoed. “With everything that is going on, how can you ask such a question?”

“Life continues even through troubled times,” chuckled the shaman. “I wonder what kind of parent you will make.”

“This is no time for me to be distracted by such things, father,” Marak shook his head. “Whatever brings such thoughts to your mind?”

“Let me ask you a question, son,” grinned the shaman. “When you do have a son, no doubt he will be a rascal like you. How will you protect him from making mistakes?”

Marak stopped walking and gazed at the ground with a puzzled frown. “I suppose that I will explain right from wrong to him at the earliest opportunity,” he replied. “Some mistakes he must endure to grow into a man, but I will explain the need for him to avoid the deadly ones.”

“And if he doesn’t listen to you?” pushed Ukaro. “What will you do when you have explained what is right, but he insists on doing what is wrong?”

“He will listen,” Marak answered firmly. “I will not raise a fool.”

“But if he doesn’t?” Ukaro persisted.

“As I said,” Marak shook his head, “sometimes letting him make a mistake will be good for him. I will not try to control his every thought. I will only seek to protect him from harm.”

“Fair enough,” smiled Ukaro. “It is wise to give a young man a long leash as some lessons are best learned through our own failures,

but what if his life is endangered by his own folly?"

"I will explain the need for him to choose wisely," answered Marak.

"And if he still doesn't listen?" pushed the shaman.

"If it is a matter that threatens his life," frowned Marak, "I will impose my will upon him to protect him."

"By force?" questioned Ukaro. "Would you actually use force on your child to make him behave?"

"If his life was in danger?" Marak sighed with frustration. "Of course I would. Then I would again explain things to him so that he truly understood. What good is sparing the rod if the child is to die? Why are you pursuing this conversation, father? I have no intention of starting a family anytime soon, if at all."

"You will make a great father," Ukaro said seriously. "I mention this now because you already have a family. The Chula are your children now. The Khadorans are your children, too. Teach them what they need to know to survive. If they refuse to listen, punish them with force until they obey, and then explain things to them again. As I said before, Kaltara will guide you. You already seem to know how to manage unruly children."

Marak shook his head in wonder, but he eventually smiled and hugged his father. "If I grow up to be as wise as you, Ukaro," he chuckled, "I will be a good father indeed. I must return to Fardale now. I will try to visit again after the Sakovans have left."

* * *

Lord Marak detoured to his secret mage training field on the way back to the Fardale mansion. When he arrived at the field, he saw Master Malafar talking to a group of women. He scowled inwardly as he turned abruptly and headed towards the mage, Klora.

"What is he doing here?" snapped Lord Marak. "How did he find out about this field?"

Klora looked at the Torak lord with surprise in her eyes. "You did not tell him about the field?" she asked. "He has been here since you left the estate. I assumed that you had sent him to explain Omungan magic to us. He has been doing just that for the last three days."

"I did not send him," Lord Marak retorted sharply, more sharply than he had intended to. "I am sorry, Klora. I should not be taking this out on you. I wonder how many others now know about our secret field?"

"Nobody else has been around, if that helps," Klora shrugged. "Calm yourself. He has seen us and is coming this way. He really has taught us new approaches, Lord Marak. Do not be too hard on him."

"Ah, Lord Marak," greeted the Omungan mage. "You have the makings of a wonderful academy here. Why do you hide them?"

“I hide them because knowledge of their existence can threaten the survival of my people,” Lord Marak retorted. “How did you find out about this field?”

“You cannot hide the use of such magic from a trained mage,” shrugged Master Malafar. “I hope that I have not transgressed too much by being here, but I did want to offer you something for what you did for me in Omunga. Teaching your mages was the least I could do.”

Lord Marak sighed in frustration as he tried to calm himself. “Walk back to the mansion with me, Master Malafar,” he eventually said. “Now that you have spent time with my mage corps, tell me what you think of them.”

“I think they are wonderful students,” smiled Master Malafar as they started walking towards the distant mansion. “There is much talent among them, and it appears that they are extremely dedicated to learning. A master could not wish for a better group of students.”

“A pity that you are returning to Sakova,” Lord Marak said. “Knowledge of Omungan magic could be helpful to them.”

“Actually,” Master Malafar said hesitantly, “I am not returning to Omunga. I have not told Lyra yet, but my mind is made up. I have caused more than my fair share of grief for both the Omungan and Sakovan people.”

“What are you planning to do?” asked Lord Marak as his mind suddenly gave thought to having the mage stay and teach his mage corps.

“I need time alone,” answered Master Malafar. “You know from your trip to my homeland that I have messed things up rather badly down there. I no longer can live among the Omungans, and I do not feel at home with the Sakovans, even though my daughter rules them.”

“You are welcome to stay here in Fardale if you wish,” offered Lord Marak as his attitude towards the mage softened, “but I think you are judging the Sakovans harshly. They have accepted Lyra as their leader, and I know enough about them to know that they would welcome you into their homes.”

“I am sure that Lyra would demand that they welcome me,” sighed Master Malafar, “but I have wronged them as well. No, it is better for everyone if I just disappear. I have given this a tremendous amount of thought, Lord Marak, and I am determined in what I plan to do. I would like to spend another three days with your mages before I leave, but I cannot stay here any longer than that. I need time alone and I suspect it will be years before I sort out my own problems. Hopefully by that time, some of my mistakes will have been forgotten.”

“You are very harsh with yourself, Master Malafar,” declared Lord Marak. “Most of your mistakes were not of your own making. Others used you. Do not blame yourself for such things.”

“What you say is true,” nodded Master Malafar, “but I have erred plenty by myself. I have to atone for what I did to Rhodella and Alfred, and I cannot begin to understand what I can do to make things up to Lyra. She is in a difficult position now and having me around will only complicate things unnecessarily. I will leave Fardale in three days.”

“Where will you go?” questioned Lord Marak.

“I have no idea,” shrugged the Omungan mage. “I seek solitude, and if I did know my destination, I would not tell anyone in any event. Frankly, I want to be forgotten. If you are concerned about the secrecy of your mage corps, do not be. I will not tell anyone that it exists, but I think you are making a mistake.”

“A mistake?” echoed Lord Marak. “You surely do not understand my situation here in Khadora. I am as much a foreigner to these Khadorans as Lyra is to the Omungans. They will seek every avenue to eliminate me. The mage corps is my secret army for when it is needed. If people learn of it, they will hasten to destroy me. Besides, I am buying mage slaves from every clan in Khadora. If they found out that the mage could be a military asset, those people would never see their freedom. I can not allow that.”

“I understand more than you give me credit for,” grinned Master Malafar. “If Khadora is anything like Omunga, you are correct in your assumption about the other clans learning of your secret mage corps. They would attack instantly to nip you before you became too powerful. There is another way, however. Can I make a suggestion?”

“Please do,” nodded Lord Marak. “I am always open to new ideas.”

“Make your mage corps very public,” chuckled the magician. “Set up a mage school in one of Khadora’s cities. Do not align it with yourself, but make it appear as a legitimate business, a school for training those with magical talent. Other clans might send their mages to your school, and unless I am mistaken about human nature, those mages will become excellent spies for you. You could also hire out the services of the mages at the school to estates so that the clans would no longer have need to maintain their own mages.”

“They would be eager to shed their estates of the untrained mages they already have,” brightened Lord Marak, “especially if I were to sell the mage services inexpensively.”

“Exactly,” Master Malafar nodded vigorously. “You will actually end up controlling all of the mages in Khadora. Oh, someone might try to start another school to be in competition with you, but mages

cannot be treated as slaves and still prosper. No Khadoran would free his slaves to be your competition."

"You are a genius, Master Malafar," laughed Lord Marak. "We have acquired so many mages that I am having a hard time keeping up with the housing needs here in Fardale. Sooner or later their practice field would have to become known to my enemies. I shall see to having that school set up right away. I do wish you would stay here longer. You may have other ideas that would prove helpful."

"I cannot delay any longer," Master Malafar objected. "Three days is all I will spend here. I should have left when we first arrived last month, but I wanted to do something for you as a payment for your help in Omunga. Without your interfering, I would have remained ignorant of my own people's deceit. Now I can consider you repaid."

"Very well," Marak frowned as he realized the Master Malafar was being helpful just to ease his conscience and not because he wanted to help with the problems facing Fardale or Sakova. "How will you break this news to your daughter?"

"Lyra has no say over what I do," Master Malafar stated sternly. "She must rule her Sakovans, and I want no part of that. That chapter of my life is over. I merely want to find a hole to crawl into and disappear. She will just have to accept it."

"I am having a meeting tonight with Lyra and some of the clan lords that swear allegiance to me," Lord Marak mentioned in a last attempt to lure Master Malafar into helping out. "I would like you to attend if you don't mind. As long as you are spending three more days here, let me see if I can tap into your brilliant mind for some more help."

"Were I a woman, Lord Marak," chuckled Master Malafar, "I would learn to be leery of your soft-spoken words. You sprinkle honey across the ground hoping to attract something useful. I will attend your meeting, but you will be disappointed if you expect me to suddenly carry your banner. I know the future of my life, and it does not intersect with yours or Lyra's. In fact, it does not intersect with anyone's. I just want to be left alone."

Chapter 3

Meeting of the Lords

As Lord Marak and Master Malafar approached the mansion in Fardale, the bursar, Kasa, ran down the steps to greet them.

"You are safe," Kasa blurted out. "I wish you would not go off without letting me know. All of the lords of your other estates and clans arrived yesterday for the meeting that you requested. I have had trouble avoiding their questions about where you were."

"I am sure that you handled it well," smiled Lord Marak. "I want to invite Lyra and Master Malafar to attend the meeting as well. When it is over, I want you to meet with Master Malafar. He has some interesting ideas about a mage school that I think you should hear."

Kasa glanced at the Omungan mage as she nodded. "I also have a stack of contracts that require your signature, and the Lord Marshal needs to see you immediately upon your arrival."

"Is there trouble?" the Khadoran lord asked.

"Lord Marshal Yenga would not reveal it if there was," frowned Kasa. "He shares nothing until you have heard it first."

"As he should," Lord Marak smiled as he saw the frustration in Kasa's face. "You worry too much, Kasa. Why don't you and Master Malafar discuss the mage school now and I will see Lord Marshal Yenga. The meeting can wait a few more minutes. Don't forget to invite Lyra."

Kasa nodded, and Lord Marak vaulted up the stairs and into the mansion. He moved swiftly to Yenga's office before any of the visiting lords had a chance to notice that he had returned to Fardale. He hesitated in the doorway and viewed the Lord Marshal talking to a merchant.

"Come in," prompted Yenga. "I have been waiting for you to return."

Lord Marak entered the office and gazed at the merchant. Suddenly he grinned broadly and slapped the merchant on the back.

"I should have realized that no ordinary merchant would be visiting my Lord Marshal," smiled Lord Marak. "What brings you to Fardale, Fisher?"

"Your service," answered the spy. "I have been picking up bits of information that I felt must be shared with you."

"Then let the three us talk," nodded Lord Marak as he pulled a chair over towards the desk and sat down. "First, what is so important

that my Lord Marshal demands my immediate presence?"

"Another caravan has been ambushed," replied Lord Marshal Yenga as deep lines etched across his forehead.

"How did we find out about it?" asked Lord Marak.

"One of our men, Netura, sent a message via an air tunnel from River's Bend," stated Lord Marshal Yenga. "He is a smart lad to have stopped in River's Bend. Most would have ridden all the way back here to Fardale."

"So we had survivors this time," responded Lord Marak.

"Only Netura," frowned Yenga, "and he survived only because Hira had ordered him to flee. Netura was not happy about abandoning his squad leader."

"Hira was a good squad leader," Lord Marak said sadly. "He will be missed. What do we know about the attackers?"

"They were dressed as gray warriors," replied the Lord Marshal, "but Netura believes that it was a disguise. The attack was efficiently executed, and the enemy took pains to ensure that not a single one of their men was exposed to danger."

"So it is a clan that wishes to hide these attacks from even their own people?" questioned Lord Marak. "Why?"

"That is what Fisher and I have been discussing," answered Yenga. "The only plausible reason that we can think of is the troops that are doing the ambushing are not from the local estate."

"You are saying that a large clan is attacking us," Lord Marak asked, "but they are using troops from a different estate? Why would they do that if they have an estate close to the ambush site?"

"Loyalty," answered the Lord Marshal. "Typically, the troops under the direct control of a lord marshal can be counted on to remain quiet about their missions. The local troops might gossip too much, and the ambushes would become known to others."

"So a lord sends troops to an outlying estate with special orders from the lord marshal of the clan," interjected Fisher. "The local estate will house them and feed them, but will not interfere in any other way. The local marshal would not even be informed of what their mission is."

"That does not help a great deal," frowned Lord Marak. "There are many clans in Khadora that have multiple estates."

"We can narrow it down," declared Fisher as he rose and walked to a wall map of Khadora. "We now know the location of the attacks. The ambushers were foolish to allow one of your men to escape."

"Where was the attack?" asked Marak as he walked to the map.

"At the foot of the Three Sisters Mountains," Fisher said as he pointed to a spot on the map. "The road is fairly well traveled, but the ambush was timed well. Netura was away from the squad at the time.

He was selecting a camping spot for the night. Few travel the road at night, and journeys are normally planned in the mornings, or at least scheduled so that they can be completed by nightfall. Only Imperial troops would travel the road at night. The road was deserted."

"So they knew the caravan was coming," nodded Lord Marak. "I suspect they had scouts checking its progress during the day."

"They may have," interrupted Lord Marshal Yenga, "but these troops would not be sitting idle at the local estate waiting for your caravans. They would have to know approximately what day the caravan would be passing through the area."

"But how could they possibly know that?" questioned the lord of the Torak clan. "We do not run our caravans on a schedule. We do not know the day of our departure ourselves until we decide it is leaving."

"It is possible that they have scouts several days out from the ambush site," shrugged Yenga.

"More likely," stated Fisher, "they have someone telling them when a caravan leaves Fardale. That is certainly how I would do it. It would be a simple matter then to know the day that the caravan would pass any particular spot on the route."

"You understand what you are implying?" inquired Lord Marak.

"That you have a spy in your ranks," nodded Fisher. "I know that you do not wish to hear such theories, Marak, but that is the most likely of scenarios."

"Have any other caravans been ambushed besides our Torak caravans?" questioned Lord Marak.

"None," Fisher shook his head. "A Sorgan caravan passed the ambush site the day before yours. I should also point out that the caravan was not stolen. They destroyed it. Intentionally. This was not done for someone's profit as much as it was done to harm you."

"Destroyed?" echoed Lord Marak.

"Yes," replied Lord Marshal Yenga. "I suspect the attack site was well cleaned up before morning, too. Your caravans are supposed to simply disappear."

"What clans have estates in the area?" Marak asked with rage almost detectable in his voice.

"Fisher and I have been going over that," answered Yenga. "There are at least a dozen possibilities. And that is only counting the estates that are close to the ambush site. We really need to include any estate that could effectively move their troops to the attack area without being seen on a road. That adds another dozen clans."

"Too many choices," Lord Marak said as he began to pace the floor. "We must narrow it down some more. Fisher, can you snoop around and see if any estates are regularly hosting troops of their clan from another estate?"

“It is already on my list,” nodded the spy. “Such information will not be easy to come by, and it may take me some time. What of your next caravan? You cannot halt shipments until I report back.”

“We could send the watula in a caravan under another clan’s colors,” suggested Lord Marshal Yenga. “You have other clans that owe allegiance to you.”

Lord Marak was silent for some time as he stopped pacing and stood staring at the map. Finally, he sat down in his chair and waved for the others to sit down.

“How large an escort did Lord Sevrin bring with him to the meeting?” asked Lord Marak.

“Just a squad of Ragatha soldiers,” answered the lord marshal.

“And how large does Netura estimate the ambushers to be?” inquired the lord.

“He suspected at least two squads,” replied Yenga, “probably a corte.”

“That is what I would expect to make the ambush easy,” nodded Lord Marak. “When Lord Sevrin leaves Fardale, I want him to leave with two cortes of Ragatha troops in addition to his squad. We should have spare Ragatha uniforms at Woodville. It used to be a Ragatha estate.”

“The uniforms will be no problem,” nodded Yenga. “What do you want me to order the two cortes to do?”

“I am not sure yet,” admitted Lord Marak, “but if you are correct about a spy in our midst, then I want some troops smuggled out of Fardale. This meeting of the lords is the perfect time to do it. Also, make sure that we have a mage who is capable of using an air tunnel among the soldiers.”

“Make sure that Lord Sevrin is the last lord to leave,” suggested Fisher. “We do not want the other lords to notice his escort.”

“You suspect one of my lords is the spy?” asked Lord Marak as his eyes narrowed.

“The average clan member does not have the consistent capability of getting word out to the attackers,” shrugged Fisher. “If there is a spy, it is from someone high up in the clans that owe their allegiance to you.”

“Make it so,” Lord Marak said to Lord Marshal Yenga. “Fisher, find yourself a Torak uniform quickly. I want you to be one of the guards in the meeting room today. Observe everyone, and we will meet again afterwards.”

“I have a uniform with me,” grinned Fisher as Lord Marak gave him a puzzled look. “There is one other thing that you should be aware of. Lord Marak and the Torak clan are the talk of Khadoratung. Everyone is trying to figure out how you came into power here in

Fardale, obtained Woodville from the Ragatha clan, and two other estates from the Situ clan. As you are aware, people in the capital do not normally think of clans this far away as anything worth talking about, so it should cause you some concern that you are the topic of their conversations."

"That is troubling," agreed Lord Marak. "All of my clans together are nothing compared to the rest of Khadora. Why do you suppose they have taken notice of dealings out here on the frontier?"

"Primarily your abolition of slavery," shrugged Fisher, "but I feel that there is more to it than that. I think some important people have taken notice of you, and that is not healthy in Khadora. Power has always resided in Khadoratung. The Emperor and the Lords' Council rule this country. The Assembly of Lords really has no power at all. I would advise you to avoid the assembly meeting later this month."

"You think there is a risk to me by going to Khadoratung?" questioned Lord Marak.

"Absolutely," affirmed Fisher. "Most people in Khadora would not have known Lord Ridak's name if they heard it. Merchants and lower officials mention your name on the streets of the capital. Someone powerful is out to get you. Stay away until something else grabs their attention."

"I will consider your warning, Fisher," sighed Lord Marak, "but you know that I do not easily shy away from confrontations. Get into your uniform, and hear what you can in the meeting room."

Fisher nodded as he left the office. Lord Marak left shortly after Fisher and met Kasa in the hallway outside the lord marshal's office.

"Master Malafar's idea sounds quite promising," the bursar said. "I think I might even know a place in Chantise where we can house it."

"Excellent," Lord Marak answered distractedly. "Set it up, but it is not to be associated with the Torak clan in any way."

"Understood," agreed Kasa. "Everyone is gathering in the meeting room. Now would be a good time for you to sign those contracts."

"I think they need to wait," Marak shook his head. "In fact, do not enter into any more contracts until we have had a chance to discuss prices."

"Prices?" echoed the bursar. "There is little we can do to change prices on the contracts."

"Why not?" questioned the lord of the Torak clan.

"We are not the only seller of watula in Khadora," explained Kasa. "If our price is too low, we simply will lose potential profits, and if it is too high, nobody will buy from us. We do not have much room to play with prices."

"What percentage of the Khadoran watula harvest do we control

between the Torak clan and the Sorgan clan?" inquired Lord Marak.

"About twenty percent," replied Kasa. "Eighty percent is grown in the Imperial Valley between Khadoratung and Chantise."

"And haven't you told me before that our quality is much better than the other watula producers?" prompted Lord Marak.

"Yes, it is," nodded Kasa, "but that will matter little if our price is too high. We need to control the market before we can dictate prices."

"What would the other producers do if we increased our prices by ten percent?" Marak asked. "Would the other producers seek to sell more watula than they have? Or would they match our price and seek greater profit?"

"I am not sure," puzzled Kasa. "If you changed the prices of only the Torak crop, the other clans would ignore it and we would be hard pressed to sell our watula, but if the Sorgan prices also went up, the other clans might seek the higher profit. I really don't know."

"Think about it during the meeting," grinned Lord Marak. "We will talk about it again."

Lord Marak turned and strode into the meeting room. Kasa hurried after him as he went to the head of the table and stood looking around at the assembled guests. All conversations died when Lord Marak entered the room and the lords, who all owed allegiance to Lord Marak, looked to him with anticipation. Lord Marak smiled inwardly as he saw Fisher slip into the room and close the doors.

"Thank you all for coming here today," smiled Lord Marak as he addressed the assembled lords. "I apologize for not being available to greet each of you individually, but other matters demanded my attention. In fact, another one of my caravans was ambushed."

The room was abuzz with whispers and murmurings when Lord Marak mentioned the ambush. He let it continue for a short while and then brought order to the meeting.

"I called you all here today to get news of how your estates are prospering," Lord Marak said. "I would like to hear from each of you and then we can discuss things that affect all of us. If you would begin, Lord Rybak."

For several hours, the lords of the Torak, Sorgan, Ragatha, Situ, and Litari clans gave reports on the status of their estates. Each of the clans had sworn Vows of Service to Lord Marak and were, in effect, one large clan. Lord Marak had kept the identities of the clans separate, and the rest of Khadora was unaware of the arrangements. This maneuver allowed Lord Marak to control five seats in the Assembly of Lords. When the reports were completed, Lord Marak addressed the lords.

"This month is the annual Assembly of Lords," he began. "I have never been to one of these meetings before, and I will probably be at a

loss as to what proper procedures are. Any hints of proper decorum from those of you who have attended it in the past would be most welcomed."

"I would advise against you attending the Assembly of Lords," stated Lord Burdine of the Litari clan. "The Assembly has little real power, and I have heard your name mentioned more than once from merchants calling upon me. This is not a good sign, Lord Marak. One rule in Khadora that is never spoken of, but one that we must all live by, is do not get noticed too much. Small lords are easily crushed in Khadora, and with no disrespect meant, you are a small lord. Even if it was known that you controlled all five of these clans, you would still be a gnat on the face of Khadora."

"Nonsense," blustered Lord Quavry of the Sorgan clan. "I have not heard any such inquiries, and I deal with a great many merchants. "Besides, I am sure that you would like to impress upon the rest of Khadora the need for us to rid ourselves of our slaves. I would be happy to join my escort with yours if you think there may be problems."

Lord Rybak, like Lord Marak, had never attended a meeting of the Assembly of Lords, so the leader of the Torak clan looked expectantly to Lord Sevrin of the Ragatha clan.

"Lord Burdine's words are accurate," declared Lord Sevrin. "There would be great risk to you in attending the Assembly of Lords. However, I think there is much to be gained by you going. As you know, I was skeptical of swearing Vows of Service to you, Lord Marak. Your ideas seemed ridiculous, especially the abolition of slavery. I have learned since that time that your ideas are exactly what Khadora needs to prosper. As you heard when I gave my report, my estates have blossomed under your new rules. I think a case should be made in the Assembly of Lords for the abolition of all slavery in Khadora. I am willing to make that case for you, should you feel that the personal danger to yourself is too great, but I cannot think of a better spokesman than the person who had the vision in the first place."

"Do you think there is a chance that the Assembly of Lords would actually listen to such an appeal, Lord Sevrin?" asked Lord Marak.

"Listen?" mused Lord Sevrin. "They will listen. I doubt that they will agree, but I have found that if you keep hammering on the same subject each year, eventually you can get a decent chance to make your point. We have to start somewhere."

"You will be sticking your nose in a bee's hive," Lord Burdine shook his head. "I agree with Lord Sevrin's sentiments, but I think he underestimates the danger. The Lords' Council is not something to mess with, and they do keep a close eye on the Assembly of Lords. It is really the Lords' Council that sets the rules. By speaking openly in the

Assembly of Lords about abolishing slavery, you will be poking a stick in the eye of each of the members of the Lords' Council. Their estates are the largest and the most dependent upon slaves. They will see you as a threat to their way of life."

"Perhaps Lord Burdine is correct," Lord Sevrin admitted. "I have gotten my points across before by being stubborn and continually raising the issues, but slavery may very well be a special case. I am afraid that I did not think through the danger inherent in such a speech."

"Lord Marak is not a whimpering lord who runs and hides from danger," chided Lord Quavry. "Besides, he would reside in the Imperial Palace for the duration of the Assembly of Lords meeting days. None would dare to touch him in that setting. There is no safer place in all of Khadora."

Lord Marak raised his hand for silence as his eyes scanned the faces around the table. He thought back on the long road that had brought him to his position of relative prominence in the frontier of Khadora. Finally, he nodded, more to himself than to anyone else.

"I will be going to the Assembly of Lords," declared Lord Marak. "The reforms that we have started out here on the frontier are too important to be ignored. I do expect each of you to support me when I speak to the other lords in Khadoratung. One last item before we adjourn. I do not want any contracts negotiated between now and when I issue new pricing instructions."

"How long will that be?" asked Lord Rybak of the Situ clan.

"I am not sure," answered Lord Marak. "I will let you know when I have decided."

The assembled lords all looked to Lord Marak with questioning gazes, but the lord of the Torak clan left the table and the meeting room. He walked swiftly to his private office and sat behind his desk. He went through the stack of contracts that Kasa had left on his desk, but his mind was on other things. Thirty minutes later, Fisher quietly entered the office and closed the door.

"What did you think?" asked Lord Marak.

"Too early to tell," answered Fisher, "but I think Lord Quavry was anxious for you to attend the meeting, and not for the same reasons as Lord Sevrin."

"I doubt that Lord Quavry has ever fully embraced my reforms," nodded Lord Marak. "How do we find out for sure?"

"We watch and listen," shrugged Fisher.

"Not good enough," declared Lord Marak. "If Lord Quavry is working against me, I want him replaced before the Assembly of Lords meeting."

"So you really are planning on going," Fisher said with surprise.

“I thought you were just fishing for reactions.”

“I must go,” Lord Marak stated. “Lord Sevrin is correct about the need to constantly raise the question before those who rule Khadora. A great evil is coming, Fisher. Khadora cannot stand against it if we are divided.”

“Perhaps preparing Khadora for our enemy is more important than your reforms,” suggested the spy. “Perhaps you should not pursue the slavery issue.”

“I see the uniting of Khadora and slavery as the same thing,” retorted the Torak lord. “We cannot be a united people when some of us own the others. Besides, we will need battle mages to survive. I do not know what kind of creature Veltar was, but there is no doubt that he was a magician.”

“You think he was not human?” inquired Fisher.

“He disappeared when he was struck down,” sighed Lord Marak, “much like the hellsouls in Angragar. I do not know if he was human or not, but he was magical.”

“I will be in Khadoratung when the Assembly of Lords meets,” Fisher said. “You may need my help there. Be sure to wear your Qubari armor.”

“I will not leave Fardale without it,” nodded Lord Marak. “If Lord Quavry were sending messages, how would he do it?”

“Probably by bird,” guessed Fisher. “You could have someone north of his estate when you expect the next message to be sent. A good archer could down the bird and recover the message.”

“And we would never learn who the recipient was meant to be,” Lord Marak shook his head. “I think an air mage would be a better choice. She could force the bird to the ground and retrieve the message. Once we know who has sent it, and what it says, we can send it on its way.”

“You mean to let the message be delivered?” questioned Fisher.

“What better way to find out who my enemy is?” grinned Lord Marak.

Chapter 4

Sakovans in Khadora

When Lord Marak finished his conversation with his spy, Fisher, he left his office and headed for the office of Lord Marshal Yenga. He was only half-way there when Kasa intercepted him.

"Klora received a message from Mistake," Kasa informed the lord.

"What is the message?" asked Lord Marak.

"Mistake is in Raven's Point," answered the bursar. "She arrived on one of your ships this morning. She wants to come here, to Fardale, to see you."

"Did she indicate any problems in her message?" questioned Lord Marak.

"None," Kasa shook her head.

"I wonder what the Fakaran is doing here," murmured Lord Marak. "Have Klora send a message to Raven's Point to lend whatever assistance Mistake needs, be it a horse, food, traveling instructions, or an escort. She is to be treated as a foreign lord friendly to the Torak clan."

"I will see to it right away," nodded Kasa.

"Not so fast, Kasa," smiled Lord Marak. "What would you say our financial condition is?"

"It is excellent," beamed the bursar. "We have more money than we need."

"Good," grinned Lord Marak. "I want you to notify the lords of a decision that I have made. You can tell them before they leave to their own estates."

"Certainly," agreed Kasa. "What will you have me tell them?"

"Tell them to raise their prices by ten percent," Lord Marak replied.

"Ten percent?" echoed the bursar. "On everything?"

"Everything," nodded Lord Marak.

"Our sales will plummet," frowned Kasa. "Just because we are in a strong financial situation at the moment, does not mean that it will last forever. I implore you to reconsider. We will not be able to sell everything at those inflated prices."

"I think we will," retorted Lord Marak. "At the Assembly of Lords, I plan to announce a twenty percent discount to any estate that has no slaves. Wait. Make that any clan that has no slaves. Some of these Khadorans would strip a small estate of slaves just to use it to

purchase things cheaper."

"You will get no buyers," frowned the bursar. "The other clans will steal your business."

"Perhaps," shrugged Lord Marak, "but I think not. We will be raising the prices today, and the meeting in Khadoratung is not for two weeks yet. I am willing to wager that a fair amount of clans will take the opportunity to raise their own prices in response. When they do, our discount will be rather tempting, and we will really only be losing twelve percent, which we can afford."

"And if the other clans do not take the bait?" questioned Kasa. "Will you then rescind your price increase and look the fool for doing it?"

"No," stated Lord Marak. "The Ksaly Company will purchase all of our excesses and resell them at whatever prices it needs to. Plus, we have the Omungan market and Fakara to take excess goods from us. We will not lose any money."

"Using the Ksaly Company, which we set up to outwit Tachora, will certainly save us from ruin," nodded Kasa, "and I admit that your dabbling in ships has paid off handsomely. Still you risk much and for what reason? The clans will not get rid of their slaves."

"Won't they?" countered Lord Marak. "What use do the clans have for slaves? Won't Master Malafar's idea of a magic school fill that need?"

"It actually might," brightened Kasa, "especially since our mages will be well trained and theirs will not be. Still, you risk much if you plan on making that a speech in Khadoratung. You will sound like you are trying to force their hands."

"I am forcing their hands," admitted Lord Marak. "I might as well tell them up front. You had better hurry to catch the lords before they leave."

"I will," promised Kasa. "You should spend some time with Lyra and her party before this day is out. She has come a long way to see you, and you have not been around."

"Right after I visit with the Lord Marshal," promised Lord Marak.

Kasa moved swiftly to carry out Lord Marak's orders. Marak entered Yenga's suite and sat across the desk from the Lord Marshal.

"How did the meeting go?" asked the Lord Marshal.

"It went well," answered Lord Marak. "Fisher is leaning towards Lord Quavry as our spy. I agree with him, but I must be sure before I act. We must act soon as well. If Lord Quavry is the spy, I want him replaced before the Assembly of Lords. Still, I cannot figure out how Lord Quavry would know when our caravans leave. Is that information ever sent via air tunnels to the mages we have stationed at the other estates?"

“Certainly not,” Yenga shook his head vigorously. I would never permit such information to be given out. The mages we have on the other estates are there to provide us with information, not the other way around. I seriously doubt that any of the other estates are even aware that the people we posted there are mages.”

“What about Marshal Patoga?” inquired Lord Marak. “Is he loyal to me or Lord Quavry?”

“Without a doubt,” declared Yenga, “he is loyal to you. Patoga is above suspicion.”

“Good,” nodded Lord Marak. “Arrange a meeting with him and explain our problem. Perhaps he can enlighten us on how Lord Quavry could receive notice of our shipping dates.”

“I can hazard a guess right now,” stated Lord Marshal Yenga. “We have a dozen Sorgans here in Fardale on any given day. We are training their people in every discipline. We provide housing for them here, but most have families back in Watula Valley, so they go back and forth. It would be fairly simple for Lord Quavry to find out what is happening here.”

“Contact our mage at Watula Valley,” instructed Lord Marak. “She is to use her air tunnels to spy on Lord Quavry. I want to know how he is getting the information.”

“If it is him that is the spy,” interjected Yenga.

“Yes,” agreed Lord Marak. “If it is.”

“What do you plan to do to make sure?” questioned the Lord Marshal.

“I will have his warning intercepted,” explained Lord Marak. “Once we are certain Lord Quavry is the spy, he will be replaced.”

“What about the person he is sending the information to?” asked Yenga.

“That is where the two cortes that we are sending out in Ragatha uniforms come in,” smiled Lord Marak. “As soon as they are clear of Fardale, I want them to move directly to the site of the last ambush. I want them to be very familiar with the area, and I want them to prepare a reception for the next set of gray warriors.”

“Ambush the ambushers?” Lord Marshal Yenga asked as his left eyebrow rose.

“Exactly,” replied Lord Marak. “Impress upon them that I want at least one survivor of the bandits to give us the information we need. I want the next caravan squad to be outfitted with Qubari armor, in case we are unsuccessful in eliminating the bandits.”

“Good idea,” agreed Yenga. “What do we do when we find out what clan is attacking us?”

“I do not know yet,” admitted Lord Marak. “Let’s take this one step at a time. The timing of this will be important. It will take me a

good week to get to the capital, so the next caravan must leave in a few days. I want Lord Quavry to have time to get the message off before he leaves."

"You are risking an awful lot on this spy being Lord Quavry," frowned the Lord Marshal. "What if you are wrong?"

"If I am wrong," answered Lord Marak, "we will still have two cortes ready to attack the ambushers. We will also have the squad guarding the caravan protected by Qubari armor. The only thing I lose is the chance to capture the real spy. I suspect that you will work on that during my absence."

"You can count on it," declared Yenga. "We will find the spy no matter who he is. How many men will you be taking to the capital with you?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Marak confessed. "I suppose a squad would be sufficient."

"A squad?" echoed the Lord Marshal. "A squad cannot guard our caravans. I certainly expect to send more men to guard my lord."

"What is normal?" asked Lord Marak.

"Normal is relative," sighed Yenga. "Some estates send only a squad, while others send four to five cortes. The more powerful lords like to parade their troops through the capital streets, as if that will impress the citizenry. Of course it is really to make a statement to the other lords. It says that the lord can afford to send an army to the capital and not worry about a neighbor taking over his estate in his absence. Every action in Khadoratung has significance."

"What message am I supposed to be sending then?" asked Lord Marak.

"I am not sure," frowned the Lord Marshal. "I was hoping that you would not attend the Assembly of Lords. Khadoratung can be more dangerous than the center of any battlefield."

"Where are the escorting troops housed in the capital?" inquired Lord Marak.

"They may be kept in the lord's suite in the palace if there is enough room," answered Yenga, "or on the grounds outside. The more powerful the lord, the larger the suite afforded him. Your suite, Lord Marak, will be very small. While you control a good deal of the frontier in this corner of Khadora, you will be considered insignificant in the capital. All of the power of Khadora emanates from the Imperial Valley. It has always been so."

"How small a suite?" questioned Lord Marak.

"A squad would be hard pressed to make themselves comfortable," sighed Yenga. "Remember that there is room outside for a larger force. Besides, no weapons will be allowed outside your suite in any event. I think you should take several cortes. Our enemies will

be surprised by the armies of your other clans should they take the opportunity to attack Fardale. We will be safe here."

"I do not want my troops in a holding area outside the Imperial Palace," Lord Marak shook his head. "Besides, that is not the impression that I wish to make this trip. I will compromise with you. I will take two cortes and a squad. The squad will stay with me in the Imperial Palace. The two cortes will camp within a day's ride from the capital. If there is trouble, they will be able to respond. If there is no trouble, you can be assured that I had a proper escort."

"I know better than to argue with you," Yenga shook his head. "I will stipulate that two air mages go with you, one with the squad, and one with the two cortes. If help is to be a day away, I want them to be able to communicate with each other."

"Done," Marak grinned as he rose from his chair. "If you need me for the rest of today, I will be entertaining our Sakovan friends."

Lord Marak left the office and exited the mansion. His black and silver cape blew gently in the wind as he strode over to the sparring yard. He immediately saw StormSong in the yard with a Fardale opponent. He smiled inwardly as he watched the tall Sakovan women battle the burly local man. StormSong was the most able female fighter that Lord Marak had ever met, and she enjoyed a good spar like few other people could. Lord Marak was drawn to the rail fence surrounding the practice yard. He leaned on the fence as he watched StormSong's perfectly executed maneuvers. Her opponent was withering under her constant blows.

Lord Marak watched for several minutes before he realized that there were no other Sakovans watching the match. He frowned as he stood erect and looked around for the Sakovans. He finally spotted them under a tree a fair distance away. His forehead creased as he watched the animated conversation. Something was wrong.

Lord Marak strode swiftly towards the Sakovans. Their conversation ceased when they noticed Lord Marak approaching.

"I apologize," Lord Marak opened. "I have been a poor host to the Sakovans. I hope you will forgive me."

"Nonsense," smiled Lyra, the Star of Sakova. "The Sakovans have been warmly welcomed in Fardale. Your people are to be commended for their friendliness and warmth."

"Yet I have been unavailable much of the time," sighed the Torak lord.

"As was I when you visited StarCity," laughed Lyra. "I seem to remember keeping you waiting for three days when you arrived."

"You were ill," protested Lord Marak. "Besides, it gave me time to explore your wonderful city."

"And busy as you have been," retorted Lyra. "I understand the

competing needs that are thrust upon you, Marak. There is no need to apologize. You have also given me time to explore Fardale and the surrounding areas. I must compliment you on the health of your choka herd. They are thriving wonderfully. That was a pleasant surprise."

"You have seen the herd?" Marak asked questioningly. "But…"

"But they are tended by the Chula," grinned Lyra. "Yes, I know. Fisher escorted me there yesterday. You forget that the Sakovans and the Chula have been allies for centuries. I could not leave Khadora without visiting with them."

"I should have known," smiled Lord Marak. "I was up there myself yesterday. You should have let me know."

"Tmundo said you were not to be disturbed," the Star replied.

Lord Marak merely nodded as he examined the other Sakovans in the group. "May I speak to you privately?" he asked.

Lyra nodded and the other Sakovans drifted several dozen paces away.

"Your father was found in the mage practice field today," Lord Marak said. "Did you tell him about it?"

"Of course not," answered Lyra. "None of my people know of its existence, as you requested. The time I spent there was easily covered up. Do you not trust my people, Lord Marak?"

"On this particular topic," Lord Marak frowned and shrugged, "I do not trust my own people. The Mage Corps will revolutionize battle here in Khadora. The longer I can keep it secret, the better the hopes of my people. I hope you understand."

"I do," sighed Lyra after a moment of hesitation. "It does not surprise me that Malafar found out. He can sense magic fairly easily. The Mage Corps is not something you could hide from him. I would not doubt that several of my people already know about it."

"Are you aware that he is not returning to StarCity with you?" asked Marak.

"I am," Lyra nodded sadly. "I believe that was his plan since we left Sakova. He feels that he must start a new life away from Omunga and Sakova. I disagree, but perhaps it is for the best. He has made a shambles of his life, and the battle in Okata nearly killed him. Maybe isolation is just what he needs to find himself again."

"I just wanted to make sure that you knew," Marak said. "I will see that he has anything he wants for his journey." Marak paused. "I could not help noticing the conversation you were having when I approached. Is there a problem?"

Lyra motioned for the rest of the Sakovans to return before she said, "There is a problem that we just found out about. Explain it to him, StarWind."

"We just heard that General Didyk is leaving Omunga," reported

the head Sakovan spy. “Such a high ranking officer has never visited Khadora in all of our history. We are concerned that it may represent another plot against the Sakovans.”

“An Omungan general coming here?” questioned Lord Marak. “That is unheard of. How do you know this?”

“The air tunnel you taught us,” grinned Lyra. “We have been using it to keep in touch with StarCity.”

“I guess you did learn it well,” smiled Lord Marak. “I am going to the capital in a week or so. Perhaps I can try to find out who he is meeting with.”

“That was the conversation that you interrupted,” responded Lyra. “StarWind and HawkShadow want to travel with you to Khadoratung. We have been debating the saneness of such a trip.”

“StarWind has experience in the cities of Omunga,” interjected HawkShadow. “I am sure that she will be unnoticed in Khadoratung.”

“And HawkShadow is unnoticed in any environment that he wishes not to be seen in,” added StarWind. “We can find out what General Didyk is up to far better than the Khadorans can.”

“What about your escort back to StarCity?” Lord Marak asked the Star of Sakova.

“StormSong and SkyDancer will be sufficient,” shrugged Lyra. “We have chokas just on the other side of the mountains. Once we reach them, no one will catch us, and the Chula will see us safely that far.”

“Then I have no problems with letting StarWind and HawkShadow accompany me to Khadoratung,” Marak declared. “Only your safety is an issue.”

“Then it is settled,” grinned StarWind.

“It is,” conceded Lyra. “Keep in touch with StarCity. There may be other developments that you will find helpful.”

“Have the Omungans selected a new Katana?” questioned Lord Marak.

“Not yet,” answered StarWind. “We suspect that Larst will be chosen. As First Minister, he has the edge over everyone else. Still, he has demanded that the selection not be rushed, as it was the last time. Every town and village has been asked for their input. I suppose that General Didyk is not happy with the choice, as Larst favors peaceful relations between Omunga and the Sakovans.”

“Which is why we must find out why the general is in Khadora,” added HawkShadow.”

“Do either of you know how to use an air tunnel?” inquired Lord Marak.

“Yes,” answered StarWind. “We use it daily to keep in touch with StarCity.”

“Then I see no problems with your plan,” declared the Torak lord. “We will be leaving here in about a week. We will travel with two cortes of Torak troops to within a day’s ride of Khadoratung. After that, we will only have one squad as an escort. Shall I have Torak uniforms issued to you?”

“Is it unusual for citizens to ride with soldiers on the road?” asked HawkShadow.

“It is done often,” replied Marak. “Travelers will seek the protection of a squad on the roads. As long as the squad is not on an urgent mission, it is usually acceptable.”

“Than I would prefer traveling that way,” HawkShadow responded. “It will allow us a freer hand and not bring any suspicion upon the Torak clan if anyone questions our activities.”

* * *

Zygor and Brakas entered through the gates of the Vessi estate. The Marshal of the Vessi clan met them in front of the mansion.

“Is Lord Samert available?” asked Brakas.

“He is,” nodded Marshal Ednardo. “Follow me.”

Zygor and Brakas followed the marshal into the mansion. They were seated in the meeting room, and the marshal left. Moments later, he returned with Lord Samert.

“I heard there was trouble in Fakara?” greeted the lord of the Vessi clan. “Rumors say that Grulak is dead.”

“Grulak is dead,” Brakas replied. “The free tribes are causing unforeseen problems.”

“I fail to see that as my problem,” shrugged the lord. “It would appear that Grulak’s grand plans died with him.”

“Grulak’s plans may have died,” smirked Brakas, “but have yours?”

“What do you mean?” questioned the lord.

“Only a fool would believe that you were prepared to assist Grulak out of compassion,” snarled Brakas. “You were helping him so that you could increase your holdings in Khadora and profit from the plunder of your neighbors. Has that desire fled you upon the news of Grulak’s death?”

“Are you proposing yourself as a replacement for Grulak?” inquired Lord Samert. “I heard that the Jiadin were scattered over all of Fakara.”

“They are,” shrugged Brakas. “Do you really need a hundred thousand men to expand your influence? Most estates in Khadora have armies of five hundred men. You need but a fraction of the Jiadin to expand beyond your wildest dreams.”

“Be careful what you imagine my dreams to be,” retorted Lord Samert. “What are you proposing?”

Brakas gazed at the marshal as he spoke, “How many men would you need to crush your neighbors?”

“Our army is strong,” the marshal replied after a moment of hesitation “Still, we could use a few hundred good men. Are you proposing to supply us with mercenaries?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Brakas replied. “Although I suppose that I think on a grander scale than you do. I can supply you with five thousand warriors.”

“Five thousand?” gasped Lord Samert. “We could never afford them.”

“But you can,” Brakas replied swiftly. “They will cost you nothing.”

“Nothing?” echoed the marshal with unconcealed suspicion. “What is your game?”

“My men will only take a share of the spoils,” Brakas smiled innocently. “With five thousand men, you can expand well beyond your borders. Khadora is a rich country, and Fakara is very poor. A small share of Khadoran spoils will appear as a king’s ransom in Fakara. Thus, my men will actually cost you nothing.”

“There is merit to this plan,” mused Lord Samert. “With five thousand men, only the largest of clans would dare oppose us, and we can be careful not to give them cause to intercede.”

“Why the Vessi clan?” questioned Marshal Ednardo. “Why have you chosen to present this offer to us?”

“Actually,” smiled Brakas, “I am offering it to each of Grulak’s allies. The Glamaraldi and the Lejune will have similar offers.”

“So you will be sending fifteen thousand men into Khadora to bring home spoils to you?” asked the lord.

“Precisely,” nodded Brakas. “I will get a small portion of each man’s take. When you are through with my men, we will have enough to found a new Fakara, and you will be powerful lords of Khadora. Everybody wins with this plan.”

“Except those we destroy,” smirked Lord Samert.

“And destroy them we must,” warned Marshal Ednardo. “The families of the controlling lords must be annihilated completely. There can be nobody left to file a grievance with the Lords’ Council. If no grievance is filed, then it remains a private affair between two clans.”

“Then some clans will have to cease to exist,” grinned Lord Samert. “There will be a problem if anyone notices Jiadin in our ranks though.”

“They will not be identifiable as Jiadin,” declared Brakas. “You are to make up Vessi uniforms for all five thousand of them. That is the safest way to proceed.”

“I agree,” nodded the marshal. “They will be Vessi soldiers and

they will take commands from me. You will have no control over these men, Brakas. Is that understood?"

"Completely," smiled Brakas. "I do not even wish to visit them. They are yours until you no longer need them, as long as I get what is due me from the spoils."

"So it shall be," Lord Samert decided as he rose. "When can we expect these men?"

"I will start sending them tomorrow," answered Brakas. "You had best order uniforms to be made quickly."

Marshal Ednardo escorted the two Fakarans out of the mansion and watched them leave the estate. Brakas grinned broadly as soon as they were off the Vessi lands.

"That was easy," laughed Brakas. "I hope the other two clans are as easy."

"They will be," remarked Zygor. "You did well in there, Brakas. How those fools think they can control five thousand of our men is beyond me, but you were correct in your analysis. Their greed blinds them to the danger. Are you sure that our men will respond when the signal is given?"

"To a man," Brakas nodded vigorously. "There is no love of Khadorans among our men. When we choose to take over the host clans, it will be easily accomplished."

"Excellent," smirked Zygor. "Let us put these other two clans in order so that I may search out my new host. We will accomplish more with twenty thousand men than Grulak had hoped for with his hundred thousand."

Chapter 5

Unraveling Deceit

Lord Marak anxiously eyed the loading of the caravan wagons. He noticed that the escorts for the caravan appeared nervous, although they were subdued enough in their emotions that a casual observer would not notice. The Torak lord sighed anxiously as he mounted the steps to the mansion in Fardale and moved swiftly to the office of Lord Marshal Yenga. Yenga's back was to the door as he studied a large wall map. Lord Marak cleared his throat intentionally as he entered. Lord Marshal Yenga turned promptly and yet calmly.

"Has the air tunnel spying revealed anything about Lord Quavry's interest in the departing caravan?" Marak asked.

"Nothing at all," answered Yenga. "Our mage reports that Lord Quavry holds his talk behind closed doors. The air tunnel is not effective in that situation."

"So we may be sending this caravan to its doom with no better information than we had the last time," sighed Lord Marak.

"Not true," smiled Yenga. "First, we know approximately where we will be attacked. Second, our troops will be wearing Qubari armor. They will not be killed easily and without retribution this time."

"Still, it would have been good to put this treachery behind us before the meeting of the Assembly of Lords," frowned Lord Marak. "I will be leaving in the morning."

"This business with Lord Quavry is not finished," declared Yenga. "Marshal Patoga and Seneschal Shamino are waiting to see you. Talk to them before you make plans for your trip."

"The Sorgan marshal and seneschal?" questioned Lord Marak. "Do you know what this is about?"

"Basically," nodded Yenga, "but I requested that the information be delivered directly to you. I would like to be present if I may."

"By all means," Marak nodded. "Where are they?"

"In the meeting room," replied Yenga.

Lord Marak pivoted and strode out of the office and into the meeting room across the corridor. Lord Marshal Yenga followed him and closed the door when they had entered the room. Marshal Patoga saluted smartly as the Lord of the Torak Clan entered the room, and Seneschal Shamino rose and bowed

"I understand that you have need to discuss things with me," Lord Marak said as he sat at the head of the table. Please be seated and

begin."

"I fear that I may be making more out of this than I should," frowned Seneschal Shamino, "but when I mentioned my concerns to Marshal Patoga, he demanded that I come to Fardale and speak with Lord Marshal Yenga. The Lord Marshal demanded that I speak to you. I do hope that I am not wasting your valuable time."

"My time is always available for my people," stated Lord Marak, "from my lord marshal to the lowest of laborers. Please tell me what is troubling you."

"I must admit to some bias in the telling of my tale," declared Seneschal Shamino. "Ever since the day you came to Watula Valley and ordered Vows of Service be given to you, I have felt that Lord Quavry plans to break them. He has never openly spoke ill of you, but his mannerisms speak otherwise."

"You should have brought this to my attention immediately," interrupted Lord Marak. "I wish to know about anyone who does not take his Vows seriously."

"Understood," nodded the seneschal as perspiration began to form upon his brow, "but there is really nothing to report. It is only a feeling, and I am hesitant to condemn a man with only my perceptions. In fact, I did not speak to Marshal Patoga with thoughts of condemning Lord Quavry. I merely expressed concerns with what I saw as aberrant behavior."

"What type of behavior?" questioned Lord Marak.

"As I am sure you are well aware," Seneschal Shamino began, "working without slaves presents a challenge for an estate that has long utilized slavery to accomplish our tasks. You were wise in ordering us to send our people here to Fardale for training, and I have seen a marked increase in efficiency upon their return. I became concerned when Lord Quavry demanded to meet with people privately upon their return from Fardale. Lord Quavry has never taken an interest in the running of the mansion before, so it intrigued me that he suddenly became very interested in these people."

"So you reported this to the marshal?" asked Lord Marak.

"No," Seneschal Shamino said. "I also interviewed the same people to find out what he was asking them, but he had no questions that indicated a betrayal, so I imagined that I was seeing wolves where none existed. It was not until yesterday that I became concerned enough to mention all of this to Marshal Patoga. Lord Quavry demanded that I send more people to Fardale for training."

"Why does that bother you?" inquired Lord Marak. "You just said that the training was making the workers more productive."

"Indeed it does," Seneschal Shamino nodded vigorously, "but all of my people have already been here for training. Lord Quavry did not

seem to care that they had all been trained. He wanted some sent back here for more training. Thinking that he had witnessed some poor behavior among my people, I questioned which ones needed to be retrained. His answer disturbed me. He did not care who I sent to Fardale for training, as long as I kept up a steady flow of people going to Fardale. There is something very wrong going on here, but I cannot fathom what it is. That was when I decided to bring my concerns to Marshal Patoga."

"What type of questions has Lord Quavry been asking your people?" asked Lord Marak.

"That is the puzzling part of it all," frowned the seneschal. "I cannot see any harm in the questions that he asks. It sounds as if he just wants to know what is going on here. He asks about visitors, meetings, caravans, and a lot of questions about you. I know there is something devious going on, but I cannot discover it."

"He asks about caravans?" questioned Lord Marak. "Does he ask specifically about when they are leaving?"

Seneschal Shamino hesitated for a moment before answering. "Yes," he finally nodded. "One consistent question always asked of my people was if they had seen any caravans leaving Fardale. You seem to find something in that question that I fail to see. What possible harm can there be in him knowing when your caravans leave Fardale?"

The veins in Lord Marak's temples began to throb visibly, but he remained silent for several minutes. Finally he rose and began pacing.

"Would you leave us for a moment, Seneschal Shamino?" Lord Marak asked as he stopped pacing and faced the table. "Wait in the hallway beyond the door. I will need to speak with you again in a moment."

"Certainly," bowed the seneschal as he rose and retreated out of the room.

"As you suspected," Lord Marshal Yenga said softly. "Shall I have him arrested?"

"Not yet," Lord Marak shook his head. "While I cannot find any viable reason for Lord Quavry to be searching for the information that he has been seeking, it is not enough to arrest the man. If he does try to get that information to others, then he shall pay the price for violating his Vows of Service. My attention now is on Lord Quavry's replacement. What do you think of Seneschal Shamino? He obviously seems to honor his Vows of Service. Does he have the skills necessary to be Lord of the Sorgan Clan?"

"He does," nodded Yenga. "I have known him for many years, and loyalty is one of his strongest traits. He runs the mansion flawlessly and is a stickler for details. I think his feelings about Lord Quavry show that his intuition is good, and the way he conducted

himself with his suspicions speaks highly for his intelligence. He was not rash in leveling false charges, yet he knew when to confide in others. I cannot think of a finer replacement unless you went outside the Sorgan clan in you search for a new lord."

"I want the lord of the Sorgan clan to be a Sorgan," declared Lord Marak. "I will not look elsewhere. Marshal Patoga, do you agree with Yenga's assessment?"

"I do," nodded Patoga. "Seneschal Shamino would manage the clan well, and his loyalty to you would be without question. He has been eager to have his people trained so that he could effectively institute your reforms, and he has done so very well. I cannot think of a better choice."

"Good," nodded Lord Marak. "Yenga, make sure that we have several air mages north of the Sorgan estate immediately."

"One is already stationed there," replied Yenga. "I will send more immediately."

"Send Seneschal Shamino in when you leave," Lord Marak said to Yenga. "Also make sure that every Sorgan visitor knows that the caravan is leaving. Do not make the telling of the information obvious, but ensure that each of them knows."

Lord Marshal Yenga left the meeting room, and Seneschal Shamino entered. Lord Marak motioned him to take a seat.

"I thank you for bringing this news to my attention, Shamino," smiled Lord Marak. "I am pleased with the work you have been doing at Watula Valley and plan to make you the next Lord of the Sorgan Clan. Is that an adjustment that you feel comfortable with?"

"It would be an honor and a pleasure to serve you in any capacity, Lord Marak," replied the seneschal, "but to serve as a lord would be the fulfillment of my dreams. I am uncomfortable with your decision, however."

"Why?" asked Lord Marak.

"Your words, while not promising to make me lord immediately," frowned the seneschal, "lead me to believe that you plan on removing Lord Quavry soon. While I do believe that he is not taking his Vows of Service seriously, he has not violated them. The scant information that I have provided is hardly enough to justify such a drastic punishment. I could not accept the position knowing that his removal is unjust."

"Your reply pleases me," smiled Lord Marak as a puzzled frown fell over Shamino's face. "No person should be punished without proof, and I will not remove Lord Quavry under such circumstances. There is more to this than you know, though. The last three Torak caravans have been ambushed. I have suspected that Lord Quavry was the source of information required by the ambushers, but I could not confirm it, nor could I figure out how he was being informed. You

have solved the last part of that problem for me. Tonight I will have the proof that I require."

"How so?" asked Seneschal Shamino.

"I believe that Lord Quavry has been sending information to an enemy using messages attached to birds," answered Lord Marak. "If I am correct, Lord Quavry will release a bird tonight detailing the departure of my caravan today."

"We do have birds on the estate that I cannot find records for," frowned the seneschal. "We have not purchased them, and I have been forbidden to use them for messages that I send to the capital. I thought you had ordered them there. How will you stop the message from being delivered?"

"I have made arrangements for the bird to be captured after it leaves the mansion," Lord Marak answered vaguely. "If this comes to pass, I will expect you to take Lord Quavry's place at the Assembly of Lords. Be sure that you are prepared for departure in the morning."

"I would like to see the message myself," declared Seneschal Shamino. "I must be sure of his treachery."

"I understand," nodded Lord Marak. "Marshal Patoga will arrange for you to inspect the bird and the message. This must be done with secrecy. I will not alert Lord Quavry to my knowledge of his plans."

"I would be willing to just view the message after your people return to the mansion with it," offered Shamino. "After many years as seneschal, I know Lord Quavry's handwriting well. I will know if he has written the message."

"You must see it when it is captured," stated Lord Marak. "The message will not be returning to the mansion."

"Not returning?" puzzled Seneschal Shamino. "I do not understand."

"We have not discovered who our enemy is," shrugged Lord Marak, "and I doubt that Lord Quavry will tell us even when he is confronted with his deceit. Our only option is to allow the message to get through to its intended recipient. We have made plans to engage the enemy when they strike at the caravan."

"I see," murmured the seneschal. "Very well. I will be ready for Marshal Patoga when he summons me."

* * *

Mistake walked away from her horse and greeted some old friends that she had met on her last visit to Fardale. The diminutive Fakaran talked briefly to her friends and started towards the mansion. Suddenly, a voice pierced the air, and Mistake sprinted for the cover of a large tree.

"Misty?" called the male voice. "Misty come back. What are you doing here?"

Mistake had caught a glimpse of the tall blond stranger before seeking the safety of the tree. She was sure that she had never seen the man before, and her mind whirled with questions. As she heard the man coming closer, a knife slipped from its sheath on her arm and slid smoothly into her waiting hand. She looked around frantically for a path of retreat, but the area was far to open to slip away. Bravely, she stepped out from behind the tree, her knife rising menacingly as she faced her opponent.

"Not one step farther," Mistake warned. "I do not know who you are, but I am sure that we have never met. How do you know who I am?"

The man stopped and his eyes narrowed as he stared at the petite thief. Finally he shook his head in confusion.

"I am sorry," he apologized. "I mistook you for someone else. Now that I can see you clearly, I know that you are not MistyTrail, but you look an awful lot like her. You move like her, too."

Mistake dwelled on the man's last statement. She had never known that her swiftness was a product of magic until the mages at Fardale had told her. Now this man was saying that he mistook her for another. He had to be lying, or was he?

"Who is this MistyTrail?" questioned Mistake. "Who are you?"

The man held up his hands to indicate that he was not a threat. "I am HawkShadow," declared the man. "I am Sakovan, and MistyTrail is a friend of mine. I mean you no harm. I will leave you in peace and apologize for my actions."

"No, wait," Mistake blurted out. "You didn't tell me who this MistyTrail is."

"She is a Sakovan like myself," shrugged HawkShadow. "That is why I was surprised to see her here in Fardale. She should be back home guarding the Sakova."

"And I look like her?" questioned Mistake.

"From a distance," HawkShadow nodded. "Now that I am closer I can tell that you are not her."

"And she moves like me?" probed Mistake.

"She does," HawkShadow nodded as he gazed questioningly at the small Fakaran. "She moves faster than anyone I know. She is also an excellent knife thrower. I would appreciate if you would put that knife away."

Mistake nodded distractedly as she slid the knife into its sheath. She reached into her pack and extracted her carozit. She held it upside down and watched as the balls fell. They did not swing down and touch each other as gravity demanded, but they also did not stand out at right angles to the stick as they always had in the past. Instead the balls hung at an angle between the two likely positions.

“How far is this Sakova?” questioned Mistake.

“It is several days of riding to the south,” answered HawkShadow. “I cannot be more accurate than that. What is that thing you are holding?”

“It is a carozit,” answered Mistake. “It is meant to help me find my family.”

“Your family?” echoed HawkShadow. “I doubt MistyTrail could be your family. If you were Sakovan, I would know you. What is your name?”

“Mistake,” she answered. “Some people call me Missy. Is that what you call this MistyTrail?”

“Close,” HawkShadow shook his head. “We call her Misty for short at times. They do sound alike. Now we know why both of us were confused. Do you live here in Fardale? I have not seen you around before.”

“No,” answered Mistake as she returned the carozit to her pack. “I am from Fakara. I am visiting Lord Marak.”

“As are we,” smiled HawkShadow.

“We?” asked Mistake. “Is the Star of Sakova with you?”

“No,” HawkShadow responded. “She was here, but she left last week. Just StarWind and I are left. You must know Rejji, the Astor?”

“We are good friends,” Mistake nodded. “I help him with everything he does in Fakara.”

“Then we have much to talk about,” smiled HawkShadow. “I would like to learn everything about Fakara that I can. Come. I would like you to meet StarWind.”

“I have not yet told Lord Marak that I have arrived,” Mistake shook her head. “I must deliver something to him first. Perhaps later you can tell me about the Sakova and MistyTrail.”

Without waiting for a response, Mistake started running towards the mansion. She dashed up the steps and through the doors without looking back. As she waited inside the doors for her eyes to adjust to the dimness, she heard Lord Marak’s voice as he stepped out of the meeting room.

“Mistake!” greeted Lord Marak. “I had word that you would be arriving. What brings you to Fardale?”

“I came to speak to you, Lord Marak,” answered the Fakaran.

“Then come into my office,” offered Lord Marak as he led the way.

They moved along the corridor in silence until they were both seated in Lord Marak’s private office. Mistake reached into her pack and produced an ancient scroll and handed it to Lord Marak.

“Rejji wanted you to see this personally,” she said. “He felt it important enough to send me here with it. He did not want to chance

the information in it to anyone else."

Lord Marak carefully opened the ancient scroll and gazed at it. "Did this come from Angragar?" he asked.

"No," Mistake replied. "We journeyed to Angragar to get more gold. After visiting the ancient ruins, we spent several days with the Qubari so that Rejji and Bakhai could visit with their people. I spent the time in their temple going through old scrolls. I found it there."

"Would they archive a children's story in the temple?" inquired Lord Marak.

"No," Mistake shook her head. "This is no children's story. Chief Dumo said it was correspondence from the elves."

"Elves?" frowned Lord Marak. "Were there really elves?"

"He insists there were," replied Mistake. "This scroll surely indicates that he is right."

"But this is so outlandish," retorted Lord Marak. "And where are the elves now? What happened to them?"

"Dumo insists that they still live," responded Mistake. "But then again, he thinks I am one of them, so maybe it is all a children's tale."

Lord Marak stared at the small women across the desk from him. His eyes paused as they passed over her pointy ears, but he shook his head and returned his attention to the scroll.

"I read a small passage about the island of Motanga long ago," sighed Lord Marak. "It also mentioned large apes, but I have since found out that the author's knowledge of those places that he described was very limited. He mostly repeated tales that he had heard in a tavern somewhere. Certainly no reliable information."

"This scroll did not come from the tales of a traveling merchant," Mistake pointed out. "It has been preserved for over a thousand years in the temple in the jungle. I have seen enough of unbelievable things in the Qubari jungle that I will not discount anything I hear there."

"You are right," admitted Lord Marak. "Still, a civilization of intelligent apes? And even if this Vand did escape to the island of Motanga that was a long time ago. This scroll was also written a long time ago. Surely it is not pertinent any more."

"Rejji does not hold the same skepticism that you do," Mistake stated. "He believes that this scroll bears the truth and that we must prepare for the coming invasion."

"And what do you think?" asked Lord Marak.

"I do not know what to think," admitted Mistake. "So much has happened since I met Rejji. Much of it I would not have believed possible before. I tend to agree with Rejji, but I must be honest with you and myself. Part of me wants to believe that I am an elf, and that the elves still do exist. I want to believe this because that means that there is a chance that I do have family, and that I can find them

someday. Maybe I am deceiving myself. I just don't know."

"At least your answer is honest," Lord Marak smiled in sympathy for the young Fakaran. "May I keep this scroll for a while? I am leaving for the capital in the morning and I would like to review this in detail when I have the time."

"It is yours to keep," nodded Mistake. "It is exciting that you are going to Khadoratung. May I travel along with you? I would very much like to see the city that Rejji talks about so much. I would also like to see the marketplace to get ideas of what we can export. Rejji says that Ghala has grown too large already and he is planning to start new cities in other parts of Fakara."

"You are welcome to join us," smiled Lord Marak. "We already have a couple of Sakovans tagging along."

"HawkShadow?" questioned Mistake.

"And StarWind," replied Lord Marak. "Have you met?"

"I ran into HawkShadow on the way here," responded Mistake. "He mistook me for someone called MistyTrail. Do you know her?"

Lord Marak stared at Mistake for a long moment before answering. "I thought you looked familiar when we first met here a long time ago," he nodded. "I should have realized it then. You look remarkably like MistyTrail. So close that you could be sisters."

"Do you think they will allow me to travel to the Sakova?" inquired Mistake. "I must meet this MistyTrail."

"You will have to ask them," frowned Lord Marak. "The Sakovans do not let outsiders trespass upon their land. I will vouch for your character, but that may not be enough to satisfy them."

"You must make them allow it," insisted Mistake. "If she is my sister, I must meet her."

"I will do what I can," promised Lord Marak as he began to feel uncomfortable with the topic of conversation. "So Rejji is truly rebuilding Fakara? What of the Jiadin?"

"There is bad news there," frowned Mistake, as she knew the conversation had been intentionally changed. "Brakas and Zygor have been trying to resurrect the Jiadin. The free tribes have been hunting for them, but so far the search has not yielded their hiding place. What about your help in getting me into the Sakova?"

"If you are traveling with us to Khadoratung," sighed Lord Marak, "you will have ample opportunity to talk with HawkShadow and StarWind. They are both high-ranking Sakovans. If anyone can get you permission to visit with MistyTrail, they can. Do not rush them, Mistake. These people have guarded their homeland with secrecy for many generations. Be open and honest with them, and I am sure they will respond in kind."

"I understand," pouted Mistake. "I do not blame you for not

vouching for me, but I have changed. I do no steal any more. I just want to find my family."

"You misunderstand me," soothed Lord Marak. "I think your character is of the highest quality. You have stood by Rejji throughout every trial he has had. My hesitation has nothing to do with you. Once you meet the Sakovans, you will understand. Their very existence hangs on their secrecy. If they are to violate that for you, I want it to be their own decision, not a favor they are doing to please me. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," Mistake nodded and smiled. "You will speak for me, though?"

"Without a doubt," grinned Lord Marak. "In fact, by the time we reach Khadoratung, I do not think my approval will even matter to the Sakovans. You will get along with them just fine on your own."

Chapter 6

Aakuta

Lord Marak arrived at the Sorgan estate in Watula Valley. The mansion guards saluted smartly and mentioned that Marshal Patoga was expecting him. Lord Marak dismounted and gazed briefly at the star-studded sky before nodding silently to the soldiers. He climbed the steps of the mansion and made his way to the marshal's office. Marshal Patoga and Seneschal Shamino were waiting for him.

"Is the message in Lord Quavry's handwriting?" asked Lord Marak.

"It is," the seneschal nodded seriously. "There is no doubt in my mind that Lord Quavry has betrayed you."

"Then let us go and attend to this foul deed," snarled Lord Marak. "I cannot understand what he hopes to gain by his deceit."

"He seeks your ruin," interjected Marshal Patoga.

"My ruin will not return the Sorgan clan to his hands," Lord Marak shook his head. "I have made explicit arrangements in the event of my death that all who owe allegiance to me shall be free men with ties to no one."

"I suspect he thinks the Lords' Council will overrule you," offered Seneschal Shamino. "That is possible. The lords of Khadora would never accept your instructions."

Lord Marak appeared lost in thought for several moments as the seneschal's words sank in. He finally realized the truth in the words and vowed to find a way to make sure his wishes would be carried out in the event of his death.

"We should go," Marshal Patoga said softly. "You both have a long journey ahead of you in the morning."

Lord Marak nodded, and Marshal Patoga led the way to Lord Quavry's chamber. Lord Marak opened the door to Lord Quavry's room without knocking. The three visitors entered quietly, but Lord Quavry was awake and staring at them as they entered.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" barked Lord Quavry. "I may owe allegiance to you, but I still demand that you show me the respect due a lord."

"There is no amount of respect that I could afford to show you," retorted Lord Marak. "You have violated your Vows of Service to me. Who is the enemy that you conspire with?"

"Enemy?" blustered Lord Quavry. "What are you talking about? I

have conspired with no one."

"We intercepted your bird," Lord Marak stated impatiently. "Where was it headed?"

"Bird?" echoed Lord Quavry. "I have no idea what you are talking about. If anyone sent a bird from Watula Valley, it was not my doing."

"I checked with the bird keeper," interrupted Seneschal Shamino. "He has verified that you released one of your special birds earlier today."

"He is lying," snapped Lord Quavry. "I shall deal with him immediately."

"Stay," commanded Lord Marak as Lord Quavry rose and started making for the door. "There is no fault to the bird keeper. It is you who are lying."

"Nonsense," insisted Lord Quavry. "You have no proof of any wrongdoings by me. This is just some game that you are playing to remove me from power and violate your own words."

"I do not need a reason to remove you from office," Lord Marak pointed out. "You serve at my pleasure. I do, however, need proof to end your life. I have the proof, but I am willing to spare your life if you will tell me who the enemy is that you conspire with."

"I will hear no more of this nonsense," blustered Lord Quavry. "Present your proof or leave my chamber."

"I am his proof," offered Seneschal Shamino. "I read the message that you sent. It not only shows your deceit, but it is unmistakably in your handwriting. Tell Lord Marak what he needs to know."

"Who are you to order me to do anything?" snarled Lord Quavry. "Where is your loyalty?"

"Loyalty?" echoed the seneschal. "How can a lord who has violated his Vows of Service question another's loyalty. You have fouled the name of the Sorgan clan with your deceit. Nothing could be more demeaning than to have a clan's name besmirched by the foul deed of its own lord."

"I ask you again, Lord Quavry," Lord Marak persisted, "who was the message sent to?"

Sweat began pouring down Lord Quavry's face. His eyes narrowed as he looked at each of the three faces before him. Suddenly, he dashed to the table and pulled his sword free of its sheath, but he was too slow in his actions to attack. Marshal Patoga drew his sword and stabbed it into Lord Quavry's chest. Lord Quavry dropped his sword, a pained look upon his face. His knees buckled and his hand went out to grasp the edge of the table for support, but he tumbled to the floor.

"The name?" demanded Lord Marak. "I will have the name of my enemy."

Lord Quavry laughed weakly as blood dribbled from the corner of

his mouth. “You don’t need a name, Lord Marak,” he gasped as pain wracked his body. “Everyone is your enemy. You are a dead man already. Nobody can stand against the Lords’ Council and expect to win. They will crush you painfully, I hope.”

Lord Quavry’s head fell to the side as he died. Lord Marak shook his head sadly.

“I did not expect anything out of him,” Lord Marak said bitterly. “At least in his death he did not disappoint me.”

“He said more than he should have,” interjected Seneschal Shamino.

“What do you mean?” asked Marshal Patoga.

“The message went to a member of the Lords’ Council,” explained Seneschal Shamino. “We may not know which one, but it is clear that Lord Quavry was dealing with one of them. It makes sense now. Only a lord on the Lords’ Council could make a coward like Quavry defy you.”

“That means that they will be pleased if Lord Marak shows up in Khadoratung for the Assembly of Lords,” frowned Marshal Patoga. “You must cancel your trip until we find out which of the six lords on the Lords’ Council is conspiring to defeat you.”

“I will not let others dictate my actions,” Lord Marak said steadfastly. “What better way to find my enemy than to enter his home. We leave at first light, Lord Shamino. Choose your replacement for seneschal. I will arrive with my escort in the morning, and we will hold a brief ceremony for you.”

Lord Shamino bowed low to Lord Marak before he left.

* * *

The Aritor squad leader halted his troops on the narrow mountain trail. As he dismounted and examined the bushes at the side of the trail, his face clouded over with wonder. His eyes ran up the steep slope, following the trail of destruction. One of the Aritor soldiers came over and knelt next to the squad leader.

The squad leader turned to him and asked, ”Have you ever seen anything like this before? The bushes are torn from their roots and discarded as if some great beast raged up the hill.”

“It would have to have been a creature much larger than any I know,” mused the nervous soldier as he gazed at the destruction. “Fortunately, this is not part of the Aritor estate. Let’s not worry about it and return home.”

“It may not be part of our estate,” agreed the squad leader, “but I think we should investigate it anyway. I cannot fathom a creature so large as to cause this type of destruction just to climb a mountain. Have the men rest. I am going to follow the path to see where it leads.”

“I advise against that,” warned the soldier. “We chose this path through the mountains to save time returning home, but what happens here is none of our concern. We should just return to our estate.”

“Where is your sense of adventure?” chuckled the squad leader. “Imagine the great feast we could have if we capture this beast.”

“If there is any chance of even coming close to that beast,” the soldier said nervously, “I think the whole squad should accompany you. Even small trees have been cast aside by whatever caused this. That is no beast that I would want to face alone.”

The squad leader examined the destruction again and slowly nodded. “You are correct,” he conceded. “It not only tore trees from its path, but it did so while climbing this steep slope. It must be extremely powerful. Have the men join me.”

The squad leader led his band of blue and green soldiers up the steep incline. His eyes panned left and right as he wondered what had blown such a path through the rugged mountainside. Subconsciously he became aware of the whistling wind, but his conscious mind blocked it out as he pondered the force used to blaze the trail. His eyes rose upward and just managed to glimpse the figure of a large man draped entirely in black. The large black specter had his hands raised high, and suddenly the force of wind tore at the squad leader and his troops. The wind was greater than the mightiest of storms, and the squad leader felt his body being thrown from the mountain.

The Aritor troops were blown from the mountain like leaves from a tree in autumn. Their bodies lay crumpled upon the narrow trail they had ridden upon. The horses were spooked and tried to pull free from their tether lines.

The squad leader shook his head and rose warily. His body ached all over from the tumbling fall off the steep slope. His eyes darted up the path of destruction, but the specter was nowhere to be seen. The squad leader looked down and surveyed his men.

“Is everyone all right?” he asked loudly.

“What was that?” questioned one of the soldiers. “What happened?”

The squad leader ignored the question. He did not have an answer for it. Instead, he personally checked each of his men for injuries. One of the soldiers remained immobile on the narrow trail. The man was unconscious, and his legs were bent at impossible angles.

“Help me with this man,” shouted the squad leader.

The other soldiers all crowded around, but none of them had any training in healing. The wounded soldier awoke, and blood flowed from his mouth as he tried to speak.

“He is dying,” frowned a soldier. “We will never get him back to the estate alive.”

The squad leader nodded sadly and stood up. “You,” he said pointing to one of the soldiers, “ride on and get a healer. Bring him back here quickly.”

The chosen soldier nodded and ran for his horse. He galloped down the narrow trail and disappeared.

“He will never return with the healer in time,” another soldier said softly. “I have seen battle wounds that were not as serious as this. He will not live more than an hour.”

“I know,” the squad leader said with remorse in his voice. “Still, I cannot stand by and do nothing.”

Even as he spoke the words, his mind drifted back to the black specter upon the mountain. He was sure that none of the other men had seen what he had seen. They surely would have mentioned it. The squad leader wondered who or what it was. It had looked like a man, a man dressed entirely in black, including a hood that covered his face. He thought about the wind that blew them off the mountain and then the force used to blaze the trail of destruction.

“Has anyone ever heard of a male mage?” the squad leader asked his troops.

All of the men shook their heads, and the squad leader turned and wandered back to the base of the steep incline. He stood there gazing upward as he tried desperately to piece together parts of the puzzle. He finally realized that the only possible way to save his man was to believe that male mages existed. He gritted his teeth and started climbing the blazed path up the mountainside.

His men did not try to follow him, nor did they call out to attempt to stop him. They were afraid that they would be ordered to follow him. The squad leader climbed slowly, his eyes always raised towards the top of the path.

He was over half way up the path when the black specter again revealed itself. The dark man’s hands rose over his head, and the squad leader shouted.

“Stop!” yelled the squad leader. “I mean you no harm. I seek your help. Hear my plea.”

“I have no help for you,” bellowed a low voice. “You trespass upon my lands. Begone!”

“We mean no trespass,” shouted the squad leader. “I apologize for any transgression, but your wind has injured one of my men. I am hoping that you have powers that will heal him.”

“Go away!” snarled the dark mage. “Take your wounded and leave me.”

“I would if I could,” confessed the squad leader. “You have

injured him beyond what we can repair."

"Leave him and begone," insisted the dark mage.

"I cannot do that," argued the squad leader. "Look, we mean you no ill, and we will depart and never return if only you will see if you can heal him."

"More likely," grumbled the mage, "you will spread word to others so that they will come and bother me."

"The opposite is true," warned the squad leader. "If my man dies, all of Khadora will know of the mysterious mage that lives here. Adventurers from all over the country will come to test their skills against you."

"Your own tongue seals your death, fool," bellowed the dark mage. "Now I cannot allow any of you to live."

The squad leader started shaking as he realized that he might have pushed the mage too far. There was little doubt in the squad leader's mind that the mage had the power to deliver on his promise.

"I do not doubt your abilities," the squad leader shouted as he tried to stop his voice from quaking, "but there is a better solution for all of us. Even if you kill all of my men, I have already sent one back to my estate. All of our deaths will be even more spectacular to those adventurers. Heal my man, and I will leave and forget my way back here. That is my promise to you."

There was no reply for a very long time. The squad leader used the delay to calm his trembling nerves. When the voice came, the squad leader jumped from the closeness of its proximity.

"Go back down the slope," the dark mage ordered in a calm voice. "Tell your men to return to your home. You alone will remain to take your wounded back. Do it now before I change my mind."

The squad leader looked up and could not see the specter upon the ridge. The voice had sounded closer as well. With a sharp intake of breath, the squad leader rose and ran down the steep slope. His men waited anxiously, and he instructed them to depart for home. The squad leader had expected scores of questions, but there was not a single one. The soldiers silently mounted and rode down the narrow trail.

The squad leader stopped next to the wounded man. His breathing was shallow and bubbles of blood formed on the dying man's lips. The squad leader was unaware of movement until the dark mage knelt alongside him.

"Sit on the road and hold his head in your lap," instructed the dark mage.

The squad leader instantly obeyed as he tried to peer at the face under the black hood. The mage's face was hidden in the darkness of the hood, and the squad leader could not see it.

“What are you called?” the squad leader asked as the mage inspected the wounded man.

“I am not called at all,” answered the mage. “My name is Aakuta, but I have no need for it. In case you have not been able to decipher my pleas, I wish to be left alone. I will hold you to your word. If you mention my location to anyone, I will search you out and destroy you.”

“My word is my life,” vowed the squad leader. “I shall never give directions to this place, and I shall never return. Can you save his life?”

Aakuta ignored the question as he ran his hands along both of the man’s legs. He straightened the legs with a popping sound and then turned his attention to the man’s stomach. For several long moments, the squad leader watched the mage run his hands over the wounded man’s torso. The mage alternately grunted and sighed as he worked, and the squad leader had no idea if he was actually doing anything.

Suddenly, Aakuta rose. “Your man will be fine,” he declared. “He will awaken in a few moments. Help him onto his horse and leave this place. Do not return.”

The squad leader nodded solemnly and looked down at his wounded man. When he looked up again, the mage was gone.

* * *

The two riders were halted at the front of the Pikata mansion. The Pikata soldiers were well trained and surrounded the foreign riders without appearing offensive. The squad leader looked expectantly at the riders.

“We have come to speak with Lord Damirath,” announced one of the riders. “I am called Brakas and my traveling companion is Zygor. Please announce us.”

One of the Pikata soldiers ran up the steps of the mansion and disappeared inside. The squad leader asked the riders to dismount and had their horses taken to the stables. While Brakas and Zygor waited, Bursar Wicado approached the mansion from the stables. He looked questioningly at the two men before entering the mansion. A few moments later, Marshal Ulmreto came out of the mansion. He approached the two foreigners.

“I am Marshal Ulmreto,” he stated. What is your business with Lord Damirath?”

“We have a business proposition for him,” replied Brakas.

“Then you should be speaking to Bursar Wicado,” the marshal stated as he turned to escort the two men into the mansion. “I saw him enter a few moments ago. I will take you to him.”

“This proposition is not for the bursar,” interrupted Zygor. “We are not traveling merchants seeking a contract for goods. This matter

must be heard by Lord Damirath only."

Marshal Ulmreto stopped and turned to face the two men again. "Lord Damirath is a very busy man," objected the marshal, "and you are unknown to us. You will deal with the bursar."

"The security of the Pikata clan is at stake," insisted Zygor. "We will speak with Lord Damirath or not at all."

Zygor looked around as if in search of his horse. Marshal Ulmreto hesitated as he observed the foreigners. Finally he sighed and nodded.

"You will leave all weapons here," declared the marshal as his men stepped forward to search for hidden weapons.

Brakas and Zygor allowed the Pikata soldiers to remove their weapons. Zygor snickered in contempt as the soldiers performed their duty. When the search was complete, Marshal Ulmreto escorted the two foreigners into the meetings room.

"Wait here," he ordered. "I will return with Lord Damirath in a few moments."

When the marshal had left the room, Brakas began to speak, but Zygor held up his hand for silence. A few minutes later the marshal returned with Lord Damirath and two soldiers. The soldiers took up positions on each side of the doorway.

"I understand you have information regarding the safety of the Pikata estate," greeted Lord Damirath. "What is it?"

Brakas turned and looked at the two soldiers standing by the door. He shook his head slowly and turned to face the Pikata lord.

"I understand the need for your marshal to be present," Brakas stated, "but common soldiers are unacceptable. It is dangerous for us to even talk about this information with you, but we are willing to take that risk. We will not speak in front of mere soldiers, though."

Lord Damirath frowned and was about to order the two foreigners thrown from the estate, but fear of treachery from his neighbors stopped him. He scowled as he nodded to Marshal Ulmreto. The marshal ordered the two soldiers to take up their posts outside the meeting room.

"This had better be important," grumbled Lord Damirath. "I do not care much for your methods. Now, what is so important that it requires my immediate attention?"

"Your estate lies close to the Fakaran border," Brakas said as he approached the wall map behind Lord Damirath. "I am from Fakara, and I have information about what is going on there that will affect your estate."

Lord Damirath turned to look at the map while Marshal Ulmreto kept his distance so that he could watch both foreigners.

"What is happening in Fakara?" asked Lord Damirath. "I heard that Grulak had been killed and the Jiadin scattered throughout the

land. I have heard nothing of danger to Khadora since that time."

"What you have heard is true," replied Zygor as he approached the map and stood behind Lord Damirath. "What you have not heard is the resurgence of the Jiadin under new leadership. Tell him Brakas."

Brakas started pointing to areas on the map. "Here, here, and here," Brakas began. "Those are recruitments camps for the new Jiadin. We have just come from one of those areas. We learned that the Jiadin are selling their services to Khadoran lords."

"Khadoran lords?" asked Marshal Ulmreto as he was drawn to the map. "Which lords and how many men?"

"Three clans have already been identified," Brakas continued. "The Vessi, Glamaraldi, and Lejune each have been allotted five thousand Jiadin warriors. These men have already moved into Khadora and are wearing the uniforms of their host clans."

"Fifteen thousand men?" the marshal said with a sharp intake of breath. "This will cause havoc among the clans. Show me the location of the camps again."

As the marshal stepped forward, Zygor's hand shot out and clamped onto Ulmreto's shoulder. The marshal halted awkwardly, his face a grimace of pain as Brakas continued pointing to the map for the lord's benefit. The lord was engrossed in following the foreigner's finger across the map. He did not notice the marshal was not talking until he heard the thump of a body hitting the floor. Lord Damirath turned quickly and stared at Marshal Ulmreto's body.

"I think it is his heart," Brakas said quickly as he knelt alongside the marshal's body. "He is dead."

Lord Damirath's mouth opened to call for help, but Zygor moved swiftly. Both of Zygor's hands gripped Lord Damirath's neck. Brakas rose swiftly and shoved a piece of cloth into the lord's mouth. Damirath's eyes opened wide in horror.

"Move the marshal's body closer to the door," Zygor instructed Brakas as the mage's eyes closed in concentration.

Brakas dragged the marshal's body across the floor. He turned and saw a flash of black smoke as Zygor disappeared. As he watched with his mouth wide open, Lord Damirath removed the cloth from his mouth and grinned.

"Fairly simple, wasn't it?" snickered the new Lord Damirath.

"Is that really you, Zygor?" questioned Brakas.

"It is," sighed the mage. "I wish they had chosen a younger body. I feel old inside this one."

"What happened to your old one?" asked Brakas as he gazed at the empty black cloak on the floor.

"Up in smoke," shrugged Lord Damirath as he bent down and

picked up the cloak and tossed it into the corner of the room.

"All right," Brakas shook his head. "Now how do we get out of here?"

"We don't," explained Lord Damirath. "We call for a healer because Marshal Ulmreto has fallen ill. There will be quite a bit of confusion, I guarantee. During that confusion, you will leave and carry out the rest of our plan. They will not even notice that the one called Zygor is missing. I will be remaining here as Lord Damirath. My first act will be to find a new marshal. Have our men ready to move here within the week."

"You will barely have time to have uniforms made up for them," worried Brakas.

"Do not let such small details distract you," chided Lord Damirath. "There are many people on this estate to make uniforms. Open the door for the soldiers as I shout for a healer. Then make haste in getting off the estate. Come back when you have completed this phase of the plan."

Chapter 7

Year of the Storm

Lord Marak signaled Botal and the squad leader called a halt to the column. Botal and the two cortains gathered around Lord Marak to hear his instructions.

"We are about to enter River's Bend," Lord Marak said softly. "This is where we will split up. Botal, your squad will accompany our foreign guests and me on a barge down the river. The two cortes will continue to the capital by road."

"Why the change?" questioned Botal. "Lord Marshal Yenga will be rather angry if you dismiss your escort.

"Yenga already knows of this change in plans," explained Lord Marak. "Lord Quavry's message not only mentioned the caravan leaving Fardale, but also told of my plans to go to Khadoratung. We suspect that our enemy may attempt to ambush us on our way to the capital."

"I understand the need for the barge," nodded Botal, "but why not dismiss the two cortes? They are sure to be ambushed even if you are not among them."

"I don't think so," smiled Lord Marak. "River's Bend used to be a Situ estate before I took it for the Torak clan. I am sure that there are scores of Situ uniforms still around. The two cortes will change uniforms and continue their journey. When they arrive to a location within a day's ride of Khadoratung, they may switch their uniforms back to the black and silver. Rest the cortes for a few minutes. I want to enter River's Bend with a minimum of notice."

The two cortains nodded their understanding, and Botal signaled his squad to break ranks from the column. The squad members instructed HawkShadow, StarWind, and Mistake to move forward. Lord Marak nodded, and Botal led the small group forward into the dark as the two cortes rested.

The guards at River's Bend were alert and efficient. By the time the small group reached the gates of the estate, the Marshal of River's Bend was there to meet them.

"Greetings, Lord Marak," saluted the marshal. "We were not expecting such a visit."

"This is no visit, Marshal Flutay," smiled Lord Marak. "I would prefer that my presence here is not talked about. Bursar Kasa arranged for a barge to be available to me this evening. Is it ready?"

“We do have a barge that was scheduled to leave today for Khadoratung,” nodded the marshal. “It is fairly empty. I wondered why an empty barge would make the journey downstream. It did not leave as scheduled, so I assume it is waiting for you. Follow me, and I shall take a route that has few eyes.”

“There will be two cortes of Torak troops arriving in a short while,” Lord Marak said to the marshal as they rode towards the riverfront. “I want them outfitted with Situ uniforms for their journey to Khadoratung. Can you arrange that?”

“Without a problem,” the Marshal Flutay nodded. “We have a great deal of Situ uniforms left over. I have refused the seneschal’s plea to reuse the cloth. I thought they might come in handy.”

“You thought well,” grinned Lord Marak. “You have adapted well into the Torak clan, Flutay. Do you have any regrets?”

“None, Lord Marak,” the marshal smiled. “River’s Bend has never been more prosperous. My troops are well provisioned and well trained. Their morale is high, as is the morale of the whole estate. It is hard to believe that we used to be Situ.”

“Excellent,” beamed Lord Marak as they arrived at the wharf. “Keep them on the edge, Marshal. Your troops will not be idle for long.”

“Sir?” questioned Marshal Flutay.

“A storm is coming,” frowned Lord Marak. “I cannot offer more information at this time, but the readiness of your troops is important. Keep them well trained.”

“You may count on them, Lord Marak,” declared Marshal Flutay.

Botal’s men swarmed up the gangplank and inspected the barge. Within moments they signaled, and Botal escorted Lord Marak and the others aboard. Lord Marak and Squad Leader Botal entered the small cabin. The majority of the squad also entered, although four members took up positions on the deck as the lines were cast off.

As the barge entered the flow of the river, HawkShadow roamed the deck examining every parcel. StarWind went forward and sat on a crate near the bow. She stared off into the dark as the barge picked up speed. Mistake moved quietly through the dark and sat next to StarWind. For a long time, neither of them spoke.

“The questions come slow to your lips,” StarWind said softly. “I suspect that you want to know about MistyTrail, but you are also fearful of the answers you will receive.”

“You are perceptive,” replied Mistake. “The thought of a sister in the Sakova excites me, but I do not see how it could possibly be. She could not possibly be any farther from the village that I grew up in. I do not wish to entertain false hopes.”

“You are wise,” StarWind smiled sympathetically. “MistyTrail has

never known any family of her own, but she is like family to all of us."

"She does not know her mother and father?" questioned Mistake.

"She has none," replied the Sakovan spy. "MistyTrail came to the Sakova as a young girl. She was not born there."

"She wasn't?" Mistake said excitedly. "Then maybe she was transported from Fakara somehow? Do you think she will remember?"

"I remember the day that MistyTrail joined us," offered StarWind. "I was but a little girl at the time myself. It was in the year of the storm."

"The year of the storm?" Mistake echoed. "Explain."

"When I was a small girl," StarWind began, "a tremendous storm raged through the Sakova. Even the oldest of elders could not remember ever witnessing a storm so savaging before. Large fargi trees were felled by the dozens, and the sevemore trees were toppled by the hundreds. We later heard that some of the Omungan cities had houses floating through the streets. Other houses were totally destroyed."

"That sounds horrible," shrugged Mistake, "but what does it have to do with MistyTrail?"

"That is how she came to the Sakova," continued StarWind. "One of our patrols discovered a man with a child strapped to his back. The man was near death, but he told a tale of endurance before he died. He was a fisherman and had been out at sea when the storm struck them without warning."

"Them?" questioned Mistake. "Why would a fisherman take a child out to sea?"

"He didn't," explained StarWind. "He fished with another villager. When the storm blew in, they decided to return to their village. That is when they heard a child crying. They searched for a long time before they found her. Perhaps the delay caused by the searching cost them their lives. We will never know."

"They were brave men," Mistake said as her lips compressed with sadness.

"They were indeed," nodded StarWind. "As they neared the coast of Omunga, their small ship crashed upon rocks offshore. They tried taking turns carrying the child and swimming, but it proved too difficult. Finally, one of the fishermen strapped the child to the back of the other man. The man with the child was the only one to reach the shore. The other fisherman was lost at sea."

"That is terrible," sniffed Mistake as she thought briefly of her own narrow escape from the sea.

"It was a ferocious storm," nodded StarWind. "The surviving fisherman made it to shore just as the brunt of the storm hit. There was no place for him to take shelter, so he walked in a daze. There

was no way for him to even tell what direction he was walking. He wandered into the Sakova instead of along the coast. When we found him, there was not much life left in him. He told his tale and asked us to care for the child. Then he died."

"So that is how MistyTrail came to be a Sakovan?" asked Mistake. "So I am no closer to finding out if she is my relative?"

"I can only tell of what I know," answered StarWind. "What the child was doing out in the sea will never be known. I am sorry that I cannot tell you more."

"She is your relative," HawkShadow said from the darkness. "Nobody knows MistyTrail as well as I do. You look like her. You move like her. You even think like her. I have no doubt that you are related to MistyTrail. Tell us of your own childhood."

Mistake's eyes scanned the darkness as she sought to see HawkShadow, but the Sakovan assassin could not be seen.

"I know little of my childhood," confessed Mistake. "I, too, was found by a fisherman, but my early years were far different. The woman who took me in was full of hatred towards me. It was she who gave me the name Mistake."

"Why do you keep it?" asked StarWind. "Without parents, you could call yourself whatever you wish. MistyTrail was named after the place she was found. Surely you can call yourself something else?"

"I suppose that I could," shrugged Mistake, "but I will not. I had to become hard to survive after running away. My name is a constant reminder of those days when I lived as a reviled being. How can I be strong enough to survive if even my name intimidates me?"

"And you are stubborn and hard on yourself like MistyTrail," HawkShadow chuckled. "I think you should return to the Sakova with us."

"HawkShadow?" interrupted StarWind. "What are you thinking?"

"I know, StarWind," defended HawkShadow, "but I also think I know what Lyra would say if she heard of Mistake. Our Star would extend an invitation for Mistake to visit. I guarantee it."

"You are probably right," nodded StarWind, "but do not hold out empty promises. We should ask Lyra before giving false hope to Mistake."

"I understand," interjected Mistake. "I have heard some things about the Sakova. I know that outsiders are forbidden to enter, but I also know that I will do anything to find my family, even if that means going where I am not welcome."

HawkShadow laughed from the darkness, and Mistake turned around with a scowl on her face.

"Do not laugh at me," Mistake said sternly, even though HawkShadow was not visible. "You have no idea what I am capable

of. My carozit will guide me to her."

"I am laughing because I could have foretold exactly what you were going to say," chuckled HawkShadow as he stepped out of the shadow of a large crate. "It is as if you are MistyTrail."

"You know her that well?" asked Mistake in a calmer voice.

"Very well," nodded HawkShadow. "I have personally trained her for several years. I could train you as well. In addition to moving swiftly as you do, I can teach you to move silently. You would make an excellent addition to the Sakova."

"No," Mistake shook her head. "I am sworn to aid the Astor. Rejji will need my help in restoring Fakara, but I can make a trip to the Sakova to meet MistyTrail."

"What is this carozit you speak of?" questioned StarWind.

Mistake reached into her pack and extracted the carozit. She held it upside down and watched as the balls descended. They did not descend as far as they had at Fardale and Mistake frowned.

"We are moving away from her," Mistake said softly. "At Fardale the balls hung lower. When they fully descend and touch one another, my family will be next to me."

"Amazing," frowned StarWind.

"Why are you so sad about it?" questioned Mistake.

"She is not sad," interrupted HawkShadow. "She is worried. The carozit could lead you directly to StarCity. Our homeland has been hidden from outsiders for generations. To know that this magical carozit can lead you there is rather disturbing."

"Does it work in the hands of anyone?" questioned StarWind.

"It does," Mistake nodded nervously. "Its use revealed that Bakhai was Rejji's brother. Do not try to take it from me."

"We shall not," promised StarWind, "but it may mean that MistyTrail will have to leave the Sakova."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," warned HawkShadow. "Lord Marak says that this Astor is tied to Lyra as much as the Torak is. I believe that we are all on the same side. Let us notify Lyra of what we have discovered. She will know what to do."

* * *

The Kamaril soldier crept silently up the path of destruction leading to the cave of Aakuta. His brown and yellow uniform blended in fairly well with the destroyed trees and shrubs. When he reached the ledge that the cave sat on, he looked around nervously. The dark mage was nowhere in sight, but a small pile of human skulls were piled near the entrance to the cave. Quietly he eased himself away from the edge of the cliff before calling out.

"Aakuta," he said loudly, "I come in peace with an plea from my lord. Please here me out."

Loud grumbling flowed out of the cave. The soldier trembled nervously as the mage emerged from the cave and looked about. His head snapped towards the Kamaril soldier. Although the soldier could not see the mage's face, he could envision the glare of rage that was hidden by the black hood.

"How dare you disturb me!" growled Aakuta. "What are you doing here?"

"Do not strike me," quivered the soldier. "Lord Druck has sent me to ask for your help. His only son is dying. He begs you to come and save his boy."

"I am not a healer," spat Aakuta. "I have no time for such sentimental trash. Let the dying die as they are supposed to."

"But you healed a soldier of the Aritor clan," protested the soldier. "Lord Druck heard of it from the Aritor lord. You must help."

"So that is how you found me," snarled Aakuta. "That squad leader broke his vow to me. Now he must die."

"No, no," the soldier shook his head vigorously. "That is not true. I was with Lord Druck when he spoke to the Aritor lord. The squad leader was punished for refusing to give your location. Another soldier in the squad that you attacked told us of your location. Nobody must die, Aakuta. I come begging for your help in saving a life. Why can't you help?"

"You and your people are none of my concern," retorted the dark mage. "I want to be left in peace. Now flee before you die."

"I will die if I return without you," protested the soldier. "Lord Druck will pay you well for your help."

"I have no use for your gold," scowled Aakuta as his arm rose menacingly, "nor your life. Prepare to die."

"Wait!" shouted the soldier. "If you kill me, Lord Druck will just send another, and another, until you are bothered every day. Even if you have no use for gold, Lord Druck does. Go aid his son, and take his gold. Charge enough and he will never bother you again."

Aakuta lowered his arm and remained silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was calm.

"What did your lord tell you to offer me?" asked the dark mage.

"He did not specify a figure," answered the soldier. "He instructed me to tell you that he would pay more gold than you could imagine."

"And what figure do you feel would be outrageous enough to spread the word that I am to be left alone?" inquired Aakuta.

"I know he would gladly pay a thousand gold to have his son healed," shrugged the soldier. "Perhaps ten thousand gold would make Lord Druck wince."

The soldier was startled when Aakuta suddenly laughed evilly. Whatever humorous thought had passed through the dark mage's

mind, Aakuta did not share it.

"Have you brought a horse for me?" asked Aakuta.

"I have," nodded the soldier with a gasp of relief. "It is yours to keep. I explained that you would need a way to come back here when you were done."

"You think well for a clansman," quipped Aakuta. "Let's get this over with. I wish to return to my studies."

The soldier led the way down the steep incline. When he reached the bottom, he turned to make sure Aakuta was following him. The dark mage was nowhere in sight.

"Come, come," Aakuta snapped impatiently. "I do not have time to waste."

The soldier spun and saw Aakuta already sitting on the spare horse. He shook his head and swiftly mounted his own horse. The soldier rode along the narrow trail at a fairly fast pace and was surprised to see that Aakuta had no trouble keeping up with him.

"How far is your estate?" asked Aakuta.

"Half a day's journey," answered the soldier.

"Bah," grumbled the mage. "Stop your horse."

The soldier cursed under his breath as he halted his mount. He had managed to convince the dark mage to accompany him, and now it looked like he had changed his mind. He wondered what he could do.

"Get off the horse," ordered Aakuta as he dismounted.

The soldier complied, and Aakuta walked forward with the reins for both horses. He stared into the eyes of each horse as he mumbled some unintelligible words. The mage finished by brushing his hand lightly over each horse and then mounting one of them.

"Get back on and let's ride," commanded the dark mage.

The soldier mounted his horse as he shook his head in confusion. No sooner had he mounted than his horse started galloping. The soldier hung on tightly as both horses raced along the road.

"You owe me another horse," shouted Aakuta. "These will die when we reach your estate."

When they arrived at the Kamaril estate, the horses did indeed die. Aakuta marched up the steps of the mansion without a glance backwards. The soldier ran up the stairs and opened the door for the mage.

Lord Druck immediately appeared and stood gazing at the mage covered entirely in black. He waited patiently for the mage to bow.

"Where is the ill boy?" Aakuta snapped. "Take me to him."

A look of astonishment fell over the lord's face, but the soldier swiftly intervened.

"Follow me," the soldier said as he led the way towards the

staircase leading upstairs.

Aakuta followed the soldier while Lord Druck and a host of important clansmen gathered and also followed. The soldier led the way to a private room and opened the door. Aakuta swept through the door and stood by the side of the bed. The boy's body was covered in oozing boils and his eyes were swollen shut. Aakuta stood and stared at him.

"Well," snapped Lord Druck as clansmen squeezed into the room, "are you just going to stand there looking at him? Do something."

"Get out," Aakuta said sternly.

"Get out?" echoed Lord Druck as everyone in the room stiffened. "This is my home, and that is my son. Do not tell me what to do."

"I said to get out," shouted Aakuta. "Either you leave, or I will."

People fled immediately, but Lord Druck stood his ground for almost a minute before departing and grumbling under his breath. The soldier closed the door as he left, leaving the dark mage alone with the sick boy. Aakuta shook his head as his eyes ran down the boy's body. He stooped over the boy and ripped the tunic from his body. Some of the boils on the boy's chest began to bleed from the wrenching of the cloth.

Aakuta was about to throw the tunic on the floor when something pierced his hand. He looked down with a rage of annoyance on his face. He saw a small pin decorated in the colors of the Kamaril clan. The pin indicated that the wearer was a member of the lord's family. He pulled the pin free from the cloth and stuck it in his pouch. He tossed the tunic to the floor and leaned over the boy.

Aakuta closed his eyes and began chanting verses that he had learned in his youth. His large hands stretched out, one resting on the boy's head, the other grasping the boy's arm. For over an hour Aakuta chanted with his eyes closed and his hands unmoving. When he was done, he opened his eyes and released the boy. His head spun as he staggered across the room. Finally he dropped to his knees and retched. For several minutes Aakuta retched and remained on his knees. Finally he composed himself and rose. He walked to the table where a basin of water and cloths sat. He cleaned himself up with the available water and walked back to the bed. He looked down at the boy and nodded. His hand reached out to the boy's shoulder, and he shook the boy. The boy's eyes opened and grew wide as he gazed upon the dark mage.

"Who are you?" he gasped as he bolted upright.

"I am Aakuta," replied the dark mage. "I am the one responsible for saving your life. Without my help you would have surely died. Get cleaned up and dressed, but remain in this room until you are called for."

The boy look down at his chest and gasped. The boils were completely gone. He inspected his arms and legs and could not find a single boil.

"How did you do this?" questioned the boy.

"I used part of my life to save you," snapped Aakuta. "In turn you owe me a debt of great magnitude. You will never speak of this debt to anyone. You will repay me when I ask it of you. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't," the boy shook his head. "If a debt is owed, surely my father will pay it."

"Oh your father will pay," laughed Aakuta. "Do not worry about that, but what I speak of is between you and me. I am a wizard, a powerful wizard. I used magic to heal you, and I can use magic to destroy you. You will pay me this debt when I ask, or you will die as you were just about to. If you mention this debt to anyone, you will die, as you should have. If you do not understand this basic tenet of magic, then perhaps I have just wasted my time saving you. Shall I end your life now?"

"No, no," the boy shook his head vigorously. "I may not understand, but I will obey your instructions. I will tell nobody of my debt, and I will repay it when you ask. Do not give me back that pain."

"Very well," Aakuta smiled. "Stay in this room until you are called for. I am sure that your father will want proof of your healing."

The boy nodded and Aakuta left the room. There were people outside the room, trying to see in, but Aakuta closed the door immediately.

"Do not touch that door," Aakuta stated sternly as he made his way downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs he stopped and looked around. People stared at him curiously, but the mage paid no attention to them. He listened intently for the sound of the lord's voice. When he heard it, he turned and strode towards it. Aakuta walked into the meeting room where Lord Druck and an officer were talking loudly. They both turned to look at him when he entered.

"I believe there is the detail of a fee still to be settled," Aakuta declared as he approached the lord.

"Is he going to live?" asked Lord Druck.

"Do you question my skill?" retorted the dark mage.

Lord Druck ignored the question and nodded to the officer. The officer ran out of the room.

"Your doubt disturbs me," Aakuta said seriously after a few moments of silence. "You think nothing of summoning me here to utilize my power, yet you doubt the results. You have what you

demanded. Now it is my turn to make demands."

The officer ran back into the room, gasping for breath. "He is as good as new," the officer reported. "There is not a sore on his body. He was out of bed and getting dressed. I can't believe it."

"Bah," scowled Aakuta. "Shut the door."

Lord Druck nodded and the officer closed the door.

"It would appear that you do have power indeed," Lord Druck smiled for the first time. "Such power would be very helpful with my neighbors. Their clan grows by leaps and bounds, and I am sure that their army will attack us soon. Perhaps you will stay and help us defeat them?"

"My fee," Aakuta retorted. "I will not discuss anything until I am paid. You owe me gold and a horse."

"Of course," nodded Lord Druck. "Your services are very valuable, and you should be paid promptly. I will have my officer go and get you a bag of gold. One thousand gold should be well worth your trip here."

"I think not," scowled Aakuta. "Is your son's life worth only one thousand gold? My fee is one hundred thousand gold."

"One hundred thousand?" shouted Lord Druck. "Are you mad?"

"Not mad," smiled the dark mage. "I do prefer to be left alone, though. My fee is one hundred thousand in gold. You may issue me script with your signature. In fact, I would prefer that to carrying so much weight."

"That is preposterous," blustered Lord Druck. "Nobody is worth that much."

"That is too bad," growled Aakuta. "I will just put your son back the way he was then before I leave your estate."

"What?" shouted Lord Druck. "You will do no such thing."

The officer, who had been standing by the door, drew his sword. Aakuta spun, his right arm rising swiftly. A power shot through the air from Aakuta's fist to the officer. The officer's arm, and the sword he had drawn, went flying across the room and thudded into the far wall. The soldier screamed in agony, but Aakuta ignored him. Loud banging on the door began as people tried to get the door open, but it would not budge. Aakuta turned and glared at Lord Druck.

"Make your choice, fool," sneered the dark mage. "Pay me, or I restore the sickness to your son."

Chapter 8

Gray Warriors

The Kamaril officer rolled on the floor and screamed in agony. People outside the meeting room banged loudly on the door and shouted with alarm. Aakuta glared at Lord Druck from the safety of his black hood, and the lord seethed with rage.

"Shut up!" Lord Druck shouted at the wounded officer. "I will pay your price, fiend, but you will never find another contract in all of Khadora."

"That suits me well," snarled Aakuta.

Lord Druck hastily wrote a script for one hundred thousand gold and placed his seal upon it. He hand the paper to the dark mage.

"Are you going to heal my officer before you leave?" he asked.

"Do you wish to enter into a new contract?" snickered Aakuta.

"Never!" swore Lord Druck. "Get out of here before I change my mind."

Aakuta put the script into his pouch and turned to face the door. He extended his arm and waved his fingers towards the door. Suddenly, voluminous billows of smoke rose from the door as it began to glow brightly. The pounding and shouting beyond the door ceased, and the dark mage smiled. As the door burst into flames and fell to the floor, Aakuta stepped through the empty doorway. The people in the hallway scattered upon the sight of the dark mage stepping through the smoke and fire. Aakuta smiled inwardly and marched out the front door of the mansion.

"Get me a horse," Aakuta snapped at the guards outside the mansion.

"What is going on in there?" questioned one of the guards.

"There is a fire," shrugged Aakuta. "Get me a horse and be quick about it. I wish to be home before sunset. Move. Now."

The guards looked at each other with indecision. They knew the mage had been summoned by Lord Druck, and they had seen his horse die upon arrival. Aakuta turned to glare at one of them, and the man ran towards the stables. He returned quickly with a horse, and Aakuta mounted it and rode towards the gates of the estate. He turned on the road that went past the estate. He had not ridden more than ten minutes when he heard a horse galloping behind him. He turned and saw the soldier that had been sent to his home to summon him.

"You must flee like the wind," warned the soldier. "Lord Druck is

sending a squad of soldiers after you. They will cut you down and retrieve the script Lord Druck gave you."

Aakuta merely nodded. "Why do you risk your life to tell me this?" he asked.

"My life has been doomed since morning," answered the soldier. "I would have been killed if I had returned without you. Now I will be killed because I did return with you. Lord Druck is in a rage. I have no choice but to flee. We must hurry."

"What is your name?" asked Aakuta.

"I am called Werner," answered the soldier. "Can you make our horses run as you did before?"

"I do not wish to sacrifice this horse," replied Aakuta. "I think I like this one."

"But did you not hear me?" Werner asked urgently. "A Kamaril squad is being sent to kill you. They will be here in mere minutes."

The sound of galloping horses rose in the distance. Werner kicked his horse and started moving away swiftly, but Aakuta halted his animal. He turned around and faced the charging soldiers. As the Kamaril squad came into view, shouts of recognition rippled through their ranks. Swords were drawn, and orders were shouted.

Aakuta sat calmly and raised both arms as he pointed towards the squad of soldiers. As the squad got closer, flame leaped from Aakuta's fingertips. The soldiers saw the threat too late. They tried to halt their horses, but fire enveloped them. Horses and humans alike screamed as the fire consumed the squad. In moments it was all over. The remains of the squad smoldered on the road. Aakuta turned to leave and saw Werner right behind him.

"I thought you left," Aakuta stated.

"I came back to help you," gulped Werner, "but I can see that you do not require any help. I cannot imagine such power."

Aakuta stared at Werner for several moments as if lost in thought. Suddenly, he smiled.

"You shall travel with me, Werner," the dark mage said. "Perhaps you can turn away those who come looking to abuse my power."

"Live out in the open?" replied Werner. "There is nothing out there. What would I do?"

"Where else would you go?" questioned Aakuta. "And what is it you wish to do?"

"I don't know," confessed Werner after a few minutes of silence. "Free men in Khadora are an oddity. I am sure that Lord Druck will inquire about me. He will find me wherever I go. My days are limited."

"Not if you have my protection," responded Aakuta. "I may have need of someone who can do things for me. I do have certain rules,

though. I wonder if you can abide by them?"

"What are the rules?" asked Werner.

"You shall never interfere in what I do," began Aakuta. "You will obey without question, and you will never discuss what I do in private with anyone."

"Sounds like a slave," frowned Werner.

"No," Aakuta shook his head. "If you ever wish to leave me, you may, but I will erase things from your memory before you leave. When I have no need of your services, you may do whatever you wish. I now have more gold than I know what to do with, so you will never be hungry or lacking in any way. The choice is yours."

Werner thought about the mage's proposition for some time before he answered.

"This erasing of my mind," he asked, "will I forget everything?"

"Only from this moment until the time you leave me," replied the mage. "You will still remember who you are and what you are running from. It will be as if you just left the Kamaril estate."

"Then I shall do it," decided Werner. "You must know that the Kamaril will come looking for us soon, though. Lord Druck will be greatly offended when he learns his squad is dead and he is out one hundred thousand gold."

"Then it is time to move on," shrugged Aakuta. "I have had a yearning to visit Khadoratung. Perhaps we shall go there and try to figure out what this script is really worth."

"It is worth what is says," assured Werner. "That is why Lord Druck tried to get it back. I know of moneymen in the capital who will negotiate it. We can trade it off for notes of smaller value for a minimal fee."

"Already you are earning your keep," responded the dark mage. "Let us get off this road and find another path to the capital."

* * *

The Torak soldiers grew tense as they approached the ambush site. Eyes constantly swept the forests on both sides of the road, but nothing was visible. The three wagons loaded with watula rumbled along, kicking up small puffs of dust. The squad of soldiers escorting the caravan was evenly spread before it and after it.

When the first fire arrows flew from the woods, it was not so much a surprise, as it was a relief. A sudden gust of wind generated by the air mage forced the fire arrows to miss the wagons. The soldiers in front of the wagons immediately jumped from their horses and nocked arrows to their bows. The soldiers in the rear did likewise as the wagons picked up speed. The air mage continued to protect the wagons by channeling small gusts of wind and hurling them at the arrows.

The screams in the forest started before the Torak soldiers on the road even made it to the gully that paralleled the road. Arrows struck many Torak soldiers, but the men kept on moving towards cover. When the squad reached the gully, they took cover and waited. Screams rang through the woods in every direction. Suddenly, gray clad warriors raced onto the road. The Torak soldiers struck them down with arrows. Another group of gray warriors flooded onto the road and were followed by Torak soldiers. In moments it was over and the silence was broken only by the murmurs of the wounded.

The Torak soldiers in the gully rose cautiously and gathered in the center of the road. From both sides of the road, more Torak soldiers emerged from the forest.

"I want a count of the enemy," shouted Cortain Talli as the Torak officer strode to the center of the road. "Any wounded are to be brought to me here on the road. Each squad, count your own men. I want to know of any deaths or injuries to Lord Marak's forces."

Black clad Torak soldiers ran in every direction. The abandoned horses were rounded up and the wagons halted. It took an hour before Cortain Talli had the information he wanted.

"A full corte of gray warriors are accounted for," reported a Torak soldier. "All are dead except for the two before you. We had some light injuries, mostly to the escorting squad, but none are serious. The Qubari armor proved to work well."

"Excellent," smiled Cortain Talli. "Separate the prisoners. I want to talk to them one at a time. Did you search the dead?"

"We did," nodded the soldier. "They carried nothing on them besides their weapons, not even a coin among them."

The soldiers escorting the wagons had regrouped and mounted. They awaited permission to continue their journey. Cortain Talli approached one of the prisoners and knelt down before the seated man.

"Who are you?" asked Cortain Talli.

The gray warrior did not reply. The cortain drew a knife and held it to the prisoner's throat.

"I will ask you again," Talli said threateningly.

"I will answer no questions," spat the prisoner. "You cannot expect a prisoner to break his Vows of Service by giving you information. I will give new Vows of Service and nothing more."

"Gray warriors do not honor their Vows of Service," retorted the cortain. "While I know that you are not really a gray warrior, I have every right to treat you as one. Do you forget that you are not wearing your clan colors?"

The blood drained out of the prisoner's face as he glanced down at his gray clothes. In Khadora, captives of war were treated

honorably. They were forced to swear new Vows of Service to their captors, but gray warriors belonged to no clan. As such, they were not entitled to any dealings of honor, because they were men without honor. Cortain Talli could do whatever he wished with a captured gray warrior, and the prisoner suddenly realized it.

"But I am a clansman," protested the prisoner. "You say you already know that. Treat me with respect."

"Not while you are clothed in gray," Talli shook his head. "Do you wear your clan colors underneath?" he asked as his knife cut into the neckline of the prisoner's gray tunic.

"No," pleaded the prisoner. "We hid our uniforms on the other side of the rise."

"We will see about that," Cortain Talli said as he signaled for one of his soldiers. "What clan do you belong to, and where did you hide your uniforms?"

The prisoner hesitated as the summoned soldier approached.

"There will be great trouble if I answer your question," protested the prisoner. "You do not know who you are dealing with."

"I aim to know," insisted Cortain Talli. "As a gray warrior, your death will linger for days. If I decide that you are a clansman, I will take you prisoner, and your fate will reside with Lord Marak."

"Lord Marak will be dead within the fortnight," sighed the prisoner. "What good will issuing vows to him do for me?"

"I am not sure," shrugged the cortain. "Either way, you will still be alive a fortnight from now. If you cooperate, you will probably be defending Lord Marak. If not, you will be wishing for a death that is long overdue."

"I am from the Nordon clan," confessed the prisoner. "Our uniforms are hidden in a cave just beyond the ridge. You will find it by looking for a large lightning struck tree. The cave is just behind it."

Cortain Talli nodded to his soldier and the man took off running.

"You made the right choice, soldier," Talli said to the prisoner. "Lord Marak will not be dying anytime soon. Why is a member of the Lords' Council attacking our caravans?"

"That is something that I cannot answer," objected the prisoner. "I am still under Vows of Service to Lord Patel of the Nordon clan. You are asking me to violate those vows, yet you know that I cannot."

"Imperial soldiers coming!" shouted one of the Torak soldiers.

Cortain Talli rose and gazed down the road. A full corte of Imperial soldiers were approaching. He walked away from the prisoner and tried to meet the new arrivals before they started asking too many questions. As he approached them, he saw that they were escorting a mediator for the Lords' Council. He bowed out of respect for the mediator.

“Greetings, Katzu,” said Cortain Talli.

“Cortain Talli,” replied the mediator. “I see that we have interrupted a battle of some proportions. What is going on here?”

“I am surprised that you remember me,” Talli replied as he tried to be sociable.

“I rarely forget a face,” Katzu responded. “You are avoiding my question.”

“A Torak caravan was attacked,” sighed Cortain Talli. “We managed to defeat the attackers.”

“I have heard rumors of Torak caravans that have gone missing,” declared Katzu as he gazed at the carnage. “It would appear that gray warriors attacked you. I hope your losses were not too severe?”

Cortain Talli’s mind whirled with the knowledge that Katzu represented the Lords’ Council and that a member of that council had just attacked the caravan. He was not sure if Katzu would carry news of the encounter back to the capital. Lord Marak would be furious if everyone knew who his enemy was before he knew.

“The battle turned in our favor,” Talli finally replied. “I do hope these Imperial troops were not sent out to aid in the battle?”

“They are my escort,” answered Katzu. “I must mediate a border dispute. I sense that there is more to what is happening here than you care to tell me, Cortain. You are aware that I am a representative of the Lords’ Council?”

“I am very aware of that,” nodded Talli as he realized that any of the Imperial soldiers would be free to tell of what they saw. “In fact, your arrival presents me with a problem. May I speak to you privately?”

Katzu frowned, but he nodded as he dismounted. Cortain Talli led him off to the side of the road. Katzu waited patiently for the Torak cortain to speak.

“This is the fourth Torak caravan that has been ambushed,” Talli began. “The wagons and cargo are not being stolen. They are being destroyed. All evidence of the ambushes is swiftly removed. The last ambush was not totally in secret. One of our men escaped and reported it. This time we stationed two cortes of men in the forest beforehand. We were very successful in destroying the attackers. In fact, we took two of them captive.”

“Then you have had a great day,” shrugged Katzu. “I sense different feelings from you, though.”

“Indeed,” nodded Talli. “These are not gray warriors at all. They are clansmen disguised as gray warriors.”

“That is inexcusable,” Katzu scowled. “What clan would allow such a despicable act?”

“That is where my nervousness comes in, Katzu,” explained

Cortain Talli. “I am supposed to personally deliver that information to Lord Marak. If you and the Imperial troops report what you have seen here today, Lord Marak’s enemy will be forewarned. That would put the Torak clan in grave jeopardy.”

“I think it would serve notice on your enemy that you are not to be trifled with,” argued Katzu. “I do not see the problem?”

“What if I told you that the clan that these gray warriors are from,” Talli asked softly, “sits on the Lords’ Council?”

Katzu’s face grew pale and his veins bulged. “I would demand a full investigation and an appropriate punishment for your lies,” Katzu answered sternly. “Do not besmirch the reputation of the Lords’ Council.”

“I do not wish to,” Cortain Talli said nervously, “but I have my Vows of Service to Lord Marak to uphold. If I could prove to you that a member of the Lords’ Council ordered this attack, would you agree to hold off telling anyone until Lord Marak approves it? Surely you can understand the gravity of such a thing.”

“Any member of the Lords’ Council could crush the Torak clan without using more than a portion of his army,” nodded Katzu. “What proof do you have of this allegation?”

“I just began interrogating one of the prisoners before you arrived,” answered Cortain Talli. “He admitted that he was a soldier in the Nordon clan. Their uniforms are hidden in a cave beyond the ridge. I sent a man over there to investigate.”

“Bring me the prisoner that you have not interrogated,” demanded Katzu. “Do not speak to him.”

Cortain Talli nodded and walked over to the second prisoner. He grabbed his arm and brought him to his feet. The man looked around as he was guided towards Katzu. He saw the Imperial troops and shook his head.

“I am Katzu,” the mediator declared when the prisoner was halted in front of him. “I am a mediator for the Lords’ Council. What clan do you belong to?”

“I have nothing to say,” scowled the prisoner.

“Let me make something clear to you,” Katzu said calmly, “I represent the Lords’ Council. Not even a lord sitting on the Lords’ Council would dare to defy me without full approval of the entire council. Your Vows of Service cannot even shield you from answering me. The Lords’ Council supersedes your vows. Now, I know that your uniforms are already being gathered from the cave beyond the ridge. Make this easy on yourself. Answer my question.”

The prisoner turned and glared at the other prisoner. Katzu’s hand grabbed the prisoner by the chin and turned the man’s head to face him.

“You will look at me when I am speaking to you,” demanded Katzu. “I am only going to ask my questions once. If you do not answer, I have the authority to force you to answer. Trust me, you do not want me to use that authority. Answer.”

“I am a soldier in the Nordon clan,” the prisoner said softly.

“Under whose authority are you acting at this moment?” asked Katzu.

“Direct orders from Lord Marshal Orik,” answered the captive.

“Is Lord Patel aware of these orders?” asked Katzu.

“He is,” nodded the prisoner. “He was present when Lord Marshal Orik sent us off.”

“And what exactly where your orders?” pushed the mediator.

“We were to wait at the Nordon estate outside of Deep Bend,” answered the prisoner. “When we were notified that a Torak caravan would be coming, we were to dress like gray warriors and destroy it.”

“Destroy it?” asked Katzu.

“Aye,” nodded the man. “Kill everybody and destroy the wagons. We are supposed to hide the evidence so that nobody would know that the caravan ever existed.”

“Do you know why the Nordon clan is doing this?” asked Katzu.

“No,” the man shook his head. “They don’t tell us the whys of things. They just tell us what we are to do. What will happen to me now?”

“That is up to Lord Marak of the Torak clan,” shrugged the mediator. “Go back and sit where you were before.”

“Do you understand the predicament that I am in?” asked Cortain Talli.

“I do,” nodded Katzu. “I probably should take this matter before the Lords’ Council immediately. To have this type of behavior from a lord sitting on the council saddens me greatly. This is not the Khadora that I love.”

“Technically,” smiled Cortain Talli, “no clan has asked for mediation in this matter. Would it be permissible to ask for your vow of silence until Lord Marak learns of this treachery?”

“And what can Lord Marak do?” questioned the mediator. “The Torak clan is not going to stand up to Lord Patel. He would be crushed too easily.”

“I cannot say what Lord Marak will do with the information,” shrugged the cortain, “but I feel he has a right to know before this is made public. It is Torak bodies and cargo that have littered this road three times before. If Lord Patel knows that his identity has been revealed, his armies will march on the Torak clan immediately.”

“You are correct about Lord Patel’s reaction,” frowned Katzu. “If I brought this matter before the Lords’ Council, the Torak clan would be

wiped out before the matter was resolved in Khadoratung."

"And that would not be fair," Talli pointed out.

Katzu nodded as he thought. Finally he said, "There has been no request for the services of this mediator. I am privy to certain knowledge of events in this part of Khadora, but I see no immediate need for me to act upon that knowledge. I will instruct my Imperial escort that discussion of this incident is not in the best interests of Khadora at this time. Tell Lord Marak to contact me when he learns of this treachery."

"It shall be as you say, Katzu," bowed Cortain Talli.

Katzu returned to his escort of Imperial soldiers. He mounted his horse and waved his escort forward as the Torak soldiers cleared off the road. Within minutes the Imperial troops had passed out of sight. A Torak soldier carrying a green and white uniform ran up to Cortain Talli.

"He told the truth," gasped the soldier. "There are enough uniforms in there for an entire corte. Were those Imperial troops that I saw down here?"

"They were," nodded Cortain Talli. "We need to clean this area up before somebody else happens along. Send the caravan to the campsite they had chosen. We will meet them there later."

The cortain signaled for another soldier. He gave orders to drag the dead into the woods and bury them. Then he ordered the two prisoners bound and placed in one of the wagons.

It took almost an hour to clean up the ambush site and catch up to the caravan. When the Torak cortes arrived, Cortain Talli walked over to the air mage.

"I need to send a message to Fardale immediately," declared Cortain Talli. "Can you do that?"

"Give me just a few moments and you can deliver the message directly to Lord Marshal Yenga yourself," nodded the mage.

* * *

The Council Room was large and immaculately white. A long white marble table occupied the center of the room with six chairs around it. Occupying the six chairs were the most powerful lords in all of Khadora. They were the Lords' Council.

"Unless there is any other pressing business," said Lord Mirakotto, "I think we should adjourn for today."

"We still have not addressed this business with Lord Marak," interjected Lord Patel. "The longer we let this type of behavior fester, the harder it will be to remove it."

"What is there to discuss?" questioned Lord Mirakotto. "The man is death waiting to happen. Why waste our time in this chamber discussing him?"

“None of us has gotten to where we are by leaving loose ends hanging,” argued Lord Patel. “All we have to do is issue a decree from this body to remove the Torak clan from Khadora. We can outlaw it.”

“We cannot,” Lord Woton shook his head. “Only the Emperor can disband a clan.”

“But this body actually certified this Torak clan,” protested Lord Patel.

“Lord Woton is correct,” shrugged Lord Mirakotto as he smiled at Lord Patel. “The Lords’ Council can recognize a new clan, but once we have done so, only the Emperor can dissolve it. Look, I agree that Lord Marak must be dealt with, but I wonder if the Lords’ Council is the proper venue? The Torak clan is a small bothersome group at the very edge of Khadora. Historically the frontier has been a land of misfits whose only purpose was that of a buffer zone to protect the Imperial Valley from intruders. Without Lord Marak, the Torak clan will cease to be a problem.”

“And without the Torak clan, Lord Marak is harmless,” countered Lord Garic. “Removing either will end this foolishness about freeing the slaves. Lord Marak is but a gnat.”

“And not worthy of the Lords’ Council’s time,” nodded Lord Mirakotto as he fixed his gaze upon Lord Patel. “His fate awaits him no matter what this body decides.”

“Perhaps you are right,” nodded Lord Patel as he caught his colleague’s meaning. “Perhaps you and I can discuss this outside of chambers, Lord Mirakotto?”

Lord Mirakotto shrugged and adjourned the meeting.

Chapter 9

Khadoratung

The barge from River's Bend docked at Khadoratung and the group disembarked. They moved together to the edge of the market place. Lord Marak stopped and pointed to a tall white structure visible over the top of the row of inns bordering the market place.

"That is the Imperial Palace," Lord Marak said. "I will be spending my days inside it. Unfortunately, they do not welcome Sakovans and Fakarans. I will send one of my men out to the market place daily. We can keep in touch that way. There is a large park between this market place and the Imperial Palace. Perhaps that would be a good place to meet?"

"I would prefer something a little less visible," frowned StarWind. "A Torak soldier meeting with foreigners might invite suspicions. Have your man walk idly through the market place and then select an inn for his midday meal. That will give us ample opportunity to speak to him."

"So it shall be," Lord Marak nodded distractedly as his head swung around and scanned the crowd.

"Is something wrong?" asked HawkShadow. "You appear apprehensive."

"I was supposed to meet one of my air mages here," frowned Lord Marak. "I wanted her to enter the palace as one of my staff. I want to keep in contact with Fardale."

"You have mages in Khadoratung?" questioned Mistake.

"Not really," answered Lord Marak. "Kasa sent a group of them to Chantise to start a mage school. One of them was to meet me here."

"I could be your mage," offered StarWind. "I mean as far as getting messages to Fardale. I can use the air tunnel."

"As can I," interjected Mistake boastfully. "I bet I hold the record for the longest air tunnel. Ghala is much farther from Fardale than the Sakova."

"Thank you," grinned Lord Marak as he saw a young fair-haired woman approaching him, "but Latril has found me. I will leave you three to do whatever it is you do best."

Botal had his squad form a protective wall around Lord Marak and Latril as the mage joined the group. The Toraks strode across the market place and along a wide avenue towards the Imperial Palace.

"Any news from Fardale?" Lord Marak asked Latril.

“Not as of last night,” Latril answered. “I have not had a chance to check with them today.”

“What of the mage school?” asked Lord Marak. “Has a location been found?”

“Oh yes,” beamed the young woman. “We purchased an old estate just on the outskirts of Chantise. The old mansion is very large and can easily house several hundred students. The property has very poor soil, but it is extensive and affords many areas of privacy for our practice sessions with battle magic.”

“Private enough to avoid new students learning of our activities?” inquired the lord.

“Yes,” Latril nodded. “We tested it thoroughly. We can practice in peace and no one will know.”

“Excellent,” smiled Lord Marak. “You will be posing as my personal assistant while we are in the palace. You will be by my side most of the time, but you need to find a place that will allow safe use of the air tunnel.”

“Perhaps our quarters will have a window,” responded Latril. “That is all I would need to remain in contact with Fardale.”

“I suppose that we will not have a problem,” remarked Lord Marak, as the group entered a large park and the Imperial Palace came into view. “It is a massive structure.”

Latril gazed across the park at the huge white building. Her head panned left and right as her eyes sought the ends of the palace.

“It the largest building I have ever seen,” she said. “Our whole clan could reside within its walls.”

“Considerably more than the Torak clan could fit inside,” chuckled Lord Marak. “Hundreds of clans have quarters inside the building. While the smaller clans may only bring a squad with them, some of the largest are reported to have escorts of three cortes or more.”

“Have you ever been inside?” Latril asked.

“No,” Lord Marak shook his head. “I have been to Khadoratung before, but never inside the Imperial Palace. It shall be a learning experience for all of us.”

As the small Torak group passed through the park and approached the Imperial Palace, Lord Marak became aware of people pointing towards him. Lord Marak subconsciously stiffened his posture as Botal led the group through the gates and along the path leading to one of the entrances. When they reached the entrance door there was a squad of Imperial troops waiting there. Botal halted the small column and Lord Marak stepped forward.

“I am Lord Marak of the Torak clan,” Marak announced to the squad leader of the Imperial troops.

“I do not recognize your colors, Lord Marak,” the squad leader replied as he signaled to one of his men. “Please wait off to the side while I get confirmation of your clan.”

One of the Imperial soldiers disappeared through the doors. Lord Marak could only nod as Botal gave orders to the Torak soldiers to move off the pathway. The Toraks waited humiliatingly as other clans arrived and were admitted to the Imperial Palace. Lord Marak could not miss the snickers and soft jeers that were offered among members of the other clans as they passed by. After what felt like an eternity, the soldier returned and spoke to his squad leader. The squad leader approached Lord Marak.

“I apologize for the delay, Lord Marak,” smiled the imperial squad leader. “I am sure you can understand the need for security here in the Imperial Palace. I see you have one member of your group that is not in uniform. She must wear something identifying her with your clan.”

“I am sorry,” blushed Latril as she reached into her pouch and extracted a small pin of black and silver. The pin identified her as a member of the lord’s staff, and she pinned it to her tunic.

“You must wear the pin at all times within the walls of the palace,” warned the squad leader. “I will have a man show your party to your quarters, Lord Marak. Be advised that weapons must be left in your quarters until you are ready to leave the palace. There are no exceptions.”

Lord Marak nodded as the squad leader summoned one of his soldiers.

“Show Lord Mark and his party to his quarters,” the squad leader instructed the soldier. “It will be in the left wing, just past the Situ clan. It has not been marked yet.”

The Imperial soldier saluted the squad leader and led the Toraks through the doors of the Imperial Palace. Lord Marak’s mind dismissed the humiliating experience the moment they entered the palace. His eyes widened as he viewed the massive entry foyer. A broad expanse of white marble floor extended to each side as far as he could see. Many other doorways entered the foyer from outside, and Lord Marak could see groups of new arrivals passing through each one of them. Huge marble columns soared upward to hold a ceiling many levels above the entrance level.

The Imperial soldier guided the Toraks off to the left as they passed through the entrance foyer. They mounted a small flight of stairs that separated the entrance foyer from another large, open area. This new area was just as massive, but the floor was tiled in a multitude of colors. It took a few minutes for Lord Marak to realize that the floor tiles represented the clans of Khadora.

“Those doors lead to the Assembly Chamber,” announced the Imperial soldier as he pointed to the far wall, which had large red doors evenly spaced along the length of it. “Your seat in the Assembly Chamber will be at the leftmost side of the room at the rear. I will make sure that it is properly marked before the day is done. The first formal meeting will be in the morning tomorrow.”

“Show me my seat now,” requested Lord Marak. “That way if you fail to mark it, I shall know where I am to sit.”

The Imperial soldier halted suddenly and turned to gaze at Lord Marak. His brow creased as he tried to figure out if he had just been slighted.

“I know the Imperial troops must be extremely busy with all of the clans coming together,” smiled Lord Marak. “After our wait outside the palace, I would prefer to know where I should go in the morning.”

“I understand,” smiled the soldier. “The other lords do tend to give new attendees a rough time. Follow me.”

The soldier led the way across the colorful floor and stopped at the last red door. He opened the door and held it.

“I cannot enter the room and leave your men out here with their weapons,” shrugged the soldier. “You will be seated next to the Sorgan lord, Lord Quavry. The seat will have your name engraved upon it before the day is out.”

Lord Marak’s eyes scanned the massive room. Hundreds of rich red leather chairs were set in rows facing a wide stage. Each chair had a small desk before it, and a small table beside it.

“Very well,” nodded Lord Marak, “but you should have your people change the name on the Sorgan chair as well. Lord Quavry is dead. The Sorgan clan is now led by Lord Shamino.”

“Oh?” questioned the Imperial soldier as Lord Marak eased out of the chamber and rejoined the group. “I had not heard. I will notify the proper authorities after I escort you to your quarters.”

The escort led the group away from the Assembly Chamber and turned down a wide corridor. Lord Marak saw doors on both sides of the corridor, and each door had a gold plaque with the clan name engraved upon it. The doors close to the foyer were spread very far apart, but as they progressed along the hallway, he noticed less space between doors. The quarters were getting smaller as they progressed along the corridor.

When the end of the long corridor was in sight, the escort stopped and opened a door with no name on the plaque. He stood aside and let the Toraks enter the suite. The door entered into a large communal room with a fireplace for cooking. There were doors off to each side of the room, and the escort squeezed by the Torak troops and stepped

alongside Lord Marak.

"On the left is a barracks room," informed the escort. "There are enough bunks in there for a squad plus a few extras. On the right is the lord's suite. It has a small study and a bedroom. You can use the fireplace for cooking, but the palace has several kitchens available. Meals are served three times a day. There is a kitchen below us for your troops. There is one on this floor for lords and their immediate family or staff. No soldiers are allowed in it. The other kitchens are for the Lords' Council and the Emperor. You are not permitted into those unless you are invited."

"Thank you for the information," nodded Lord Marak. "I may have more questions later. What is your name, soldier?"

"I am called Chard," replied the escort. "I have welcoming duty today, but I will be part of the security detail after everyone arrives. I will be available if you have questions, but any soldier of the Imperial force will help guide you. The Imperial soldiers do not take part in any clan disputes, Lord Marak. We are separate from all clans and serve the Emperor. Your reception was not meant to belittle you. We were merely uninformed that you would be attending the Assembly of Lords."

"Somebody must have made a mistake," shrugged Lord Marak. "The Torak clan was recognized by the Lords' Council a long time ago."

"Indeed it was," agreed Chard, "and we are trained to recognize clans by their colors, but we have never seen the black and silver before. I am not sure why your quarters and assembly chair have not been marked."

"Just unfortunate, I guess," smiled Lord Marak.

"Yes," nodded Chard. "You can be assured that all of the Imperial troops will be informed before this day is out. There will be no more embarrassing moments caused by Imperial troops."

"Thank you, Chard," Lord Marak said. "You have been most helpful. Are we free to roam the palace?"

"Pretty much," answered Chard. "If there are areas where you are not permitted, you will be notified. You must stress upon your people that weapons of any kind are not allowed out of this suite. If one of your men is armed, Imperial troops will try to detain the offender, but they are authorized to kill if need be. This directive includes the lords as well. In this regard, lords are no different than their soldiers."

"What if I want to send a messenger out of the palace?" asked Lord Marak.

"He either leaves the palace unarmed," replied Chard, "or you arrange an Imperial escort for him. Contact any Imperial soldier and say that you need an escort. Your request will be acted on

immediately."

"Very well," nodded Lord Marak.

Chard started to leave and halted abruptly. "There are only three keys to this suite," he advised. "Two of them hang on the back of the door here. The Imperial staff keeps the third. Do not lose your keys or there will a problem with housing your men until the lock is refitted."

Lord Marak nodded and Chard left the suite. Lord Marak strode immediately to the lord's suite. Latril followed him closely. The study was small but adequate. They passed through the study to the bedroom. One large bed occupied one wall, and a long dresser took up most of the opposite wall.

"No windows," frowned Latril. "How are we to communicate with Fardale?"

"We will think of something," mused Lord Marak. "You will sleep in here, Latril. I will bunk with the soldiers. Let me get rid of my weapons and we will take a stroll around the palace."

Lord Marak removed his sheath and placed it on the desk in the study. He felt his broad waist belt and frowned at the touch of the Sakovan stars secreted in it. Although he felt naked without the stars, he removed them from their hidden place and placed them on the desk. Next, he removed two knives from his arm sheaths, and two more from his boots. He sighed as he stepped back into the communal room.

"Do not disgrace us by being caught with weapons," Lord Marak warned his soldiers. "Make sure that even your hidden weapons remain here. Halman, Gunta, come with me. Latril and I are going for a walk to see if we can find a good place for an air tunnel. Botal, I want this palace mapped. Send the men out in groups of two. Do not make it obvious what you are doing. No paper or notes until you return here. Pay special attention to areas that are restricted, and look for any open air areas like balconies."

"What about guarding the suite?" asked Botal.

"You take one of the keys, and I will take the other," replied Lord Marak. "You organize your men and arrange for them to get back in. I will handle my party. I doubt anyone is going to break in to steal our clothes and weapons."

Botal nodded as he handed one of the keys to Lord Marak. Halman opened the door and Gunta glided through it before Lord Marak and Latril. Lord Marak checked the corridor in both directions before turning towards the rear of the palace.

* * *

StarWind, HawkShadow, and Mistake stood at the edge of the market place in Khadoratung. Thousands of people shuffled by, making rounds of the stalls in search of bargains.

“Where do you want to begin?” asked HawkShadow.

StarWind gazed at the multitude of people moving around and shook her head. “I say we start with the inns,” she replied. “Each side of the market appears to host a row of inns. You can take one side, and I will take the other.”

“These are just the inns in the market area,” complained HawkShadow. “I saw more inns along the riverfront. Khadoratung is a much larger city than even Okata. We could spend days just visiting each inn briefly. How do you expect to find General Didyk in all this mess?”

“A foreign general should be something memorable to almost anyone,” shrugged StarWind.

“True,” countered HawkShadow, “but anyone asking about him will also be memorable. That is not a healthy approach.”

“You are right,” StarWind nodded thoughtfully. “Let’s just visit the inns briefly on the chance that he is dining in one of them. Keep your ears open. Khadoratung will not be so different from Okata that people will not love to gossip. If he has been here recently, somebody will be talking about him.”

“All right,” shrugged HawkShadow. “I will meet you back here as the sun sets.”

“I will keep my ears open, too,” offered Mistake as HawkShadow and StarWind departed.

The small Fakaran grinned as she turned her attention to the market stalls. Her eyes widened as she proceeded along one of the rows and gazed at the merchandise for sale. Mistake had never been to a large city, and the market in Khadoratung appeared to be a treasure trove to her. She moved by the stalls slowly, her eyes scanned each stall as she admired the variety of goods available.

The hours passed and Mistake did not realize that she was hungry until a young boy came by with a cart loaded with food for the merchants. She looked past the last row of stalls and saw an inn. She turned at the first intersection and made her way to the Wine Press Inn. She entered the common room and sat at an empty table. The innkeeper came to her immediately, and Mistake thought she would be kicked out.

“Are you here for a meal?” asked the innkeeper.

“Yes,” Mistake hesitantly as she reached for her pouch of gold to prove that she could pay for the meal.

“Our meals are one gold,” smiled the innkeeper. “You have your choice of wasooki and bread, or clova and rice. Which would you prefer?”

“I will have the wasooki,” Mistake smiled as she realized that the innkeeper was not going to hassle her.

“I will have it sent right out,” nodded the innkeeper as he moved swiftly to another customer who had just entered.

Mistake relaxed and began to wonder what it would be like to live in such a large city. Nobody had bothered her as she browsed the market stalls, and even the innkeeper of the fine inn treated her with respect. It was a far cry from her treatment in the small villages of Fakara. She was lost in thought as two men sat across the table from her. She did not even notice their arrival until the innkeeper brought her wasooki and asked the men for their order.

She looked up and caught the two men staring at her. One of the men was young and handsome and was dressed in a uniform of brown and yellow. The other man was completely covered in black; even his head was covered by a black hood. Mistake tried to peer under the man’s hood, but he snarled at her in a barely perceptible voice. Mistake turned her attention to her meal and ignored the men.

When Mistake diverted her attention, the two men let their guard down slightly. Mistake’s ears perked up as she listened to them whisper. She kept her eyes glued to her plate as she listened to every word.

“You must find other clothes,” the dark man whispered. “These are the days of the Assembly of Lords. Lord Druck will probably attend.”

“Without a doubt,” the military man answered. “I suggest that you also change your appearance. In case you haven’t noticed, everyone stares at you when they see you.”

The hooded man grunted, and Mistake finished her meal. She started to slide down the bench to leave when the dark man’s hand shot out and grabbed her arm.

“You are not from this country, are you?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

A knife slid into Mistake’s free hand as she glared at the hooded man.

“Where I am from,” Mistake spat quietly, “it is not acceptable to grab strangers. I suggest that you remove your hand from my arm, or I shall remove it for you.”

The man must have seen the light glint off Mistake’s blade because he immediately let go of her arm.

“What are you doing?” scolded the military man in a whisper. “We do not want to be noticed.”

“I am sorry,” apologized the dark man. “I must have mistook you for someone else.”

Mistake glared at the man as she eased her knife back into its arm sheath. She walked away from the table and paid the innkeeper his one gold. He thanked her for her business as Mistake slipped out the

door of the inn. Her mind was still on the encounter at the inn when she stopped in front of a small stall with expensive art objects. Her eyes automatically scanned the objects and froze when they saw a fossilized shark's tooth.

"Don't even think about it," warned the merchant. "I can smell a thief long before she gets to my stall. I could put a knife through your hand before you could grab it and run."

Mistake looked up and glared at the merchant. Suddenly, the stories that Rejji had told about his trip to Khadoratung flooded into Mistake's mind. She grinned at the merchant.

"I heard that Wendal was a good teacher," she grinned, "but is he really quick with a knife? I am interested in that shark's tooth."

"Don't even try to touch it," warned Wendal. "I don't want to harm you."

"How much is it?" Mistake asked.

"Four hundred gold as if that matters," retorted Wendal.

Mistake untied her gold pouch and placed it on the table. "There is five hundred gold in that pouch," she declared. "It is yours if you can stop me from taking the tooth."

"What kind of game is this?" Wendal asked as his eyes narrowed and a knife slid into his hand.

"The tooth is mine if I get it," smiled Mistake. "Are you a betting man, Wendal?"

"I will have your gold and your hand," cautioned the merchant. "I am not fooling around here. I am ready for your move and will not miss. Take your gold and move along."

Mistake's hand shot out and grabbed the shark's tooth. Wendal acted swiftly and jabbed the knife where the tooth had been, but Mistake's hand was already gone.

"How did you do that?" Wendal asked with a frown of disbelief on his face. "That is not possible."

Mistake grinned and held her arm out towards Wendal. She opened her fingers to show the tooth safely resting in her palm. Wendal grabbed for the tooth, but Mistake laughed as she moved her arm swiftly out of the way.

"Give it back," demanded Wendal. "I did not agree to the wager. I will call the Imperial troops if you do not return it."

"Return what?" laughed Mistake as she picked up her gold pouch and retied it.

Wendal shook his head with disbelief as he gazed down and saw the shark's tooth exactly where it was supposed to be.

"How can you move so fast?" he asked. "Why have I never seen you around here before?"

"I have never been here before," Mistake answered.

“But you knew my name,” Wendal said in confusion.

“Rejji told me all about you,” smiled Mistake. “He said you taught him a great deal.”

“You are Rejji’s girl?” grinned Wendal. “No wonder he was love struck. Where is he? What is he doing? How did he gain your freedom?”

“He said he was love struck?” asked Mistake.

“He didn’t say it,” shrugged Wendal, “but I can tell these things. He spent three days trying to get enough gold to buy your freedom. I wish he had bought his own freedom. He is a talented lad. I could use him.”

“He is talented,” nodded Mistake. “He is no longer a slave.”

“He isn’t?” grinned Wendal. “Is he here in the city with you?”

“No, he has returned to Fakara,” Mistake replied.

“Fakara?” spat Wendal. “He does not belong in that barren country. The lad has a knack for dealing. He needs to be in a large city like Khadoratung.”

“Perhaps he will build one in Fakara,” teased Mistake.

“Not much chance of that happening,” Wendal shook his head. “The last news I had of Fakara is that of warfare. I heard that one called Grulak is fighting the other tribes for the right to rule all of Fakara. It is a dangerous place. You should get word to Rejji to come here.”

“Actually,” grinned Mistake, “Rejji sent me here instead. He wants to know what we can sell to the Khadorans now that Fakara is rebuilding.”

“Fakara is rebuilding?” echoed Wendal. “Who won? Was it Grulak or the free tribes?”

“Rejji won,” declared Mistake. “Rejji is now the ruler of Fakara. Grulak is dead. The free tribes have all gathered behind Rejji.”

“You are serious,” grinned Wendal. “I can tell it in your eyes. I always knew that lad had something special. What kind of goods can he supply?”

Chapter 10

Spying

Mistake stood at the corner of the marketplace waiting for the Sakovans to arrive. HawkShadow appeared first, and Mistake watched him approach. The assassin's gait appeared normal, but the small Fakaran could detect the wariness in him. HawkShadow's eyes scanned the crowd around him without ever seeming to move. The natural movement of his head afforded him a wide perspective of the marketplace and the people within it. Mistake began to wonder about what the Sakovan could teach her. She was sure that HawkShadow had never been to this city before, yet he looked as if it was his home. He smiled and nodded to people who naturally returned his greeting as if they knew him.

"Any sign of StarWind?" HawkShadow asked softly as he reached the corner that Mistake was standing on.

"Not yet," answered Mistake. "Aren't you nervous about being in this city?"

"I do not care much for being in any city," shrugged HawkShadow as he gazed over Mistake's shoulder. "Here she comes now."

Mistake started to turn around, but HawkShadow's hand shot out and landed on her shoulder.

"You do not need to see StarWind for her to arrive," smiled HawkShadow. "It is better to notice things without appearing to. Just act as if we are old friends who have met by chance. We will be ignored that way."

Mistake nodded to HawkShadow as StarWind stepped up alongside her.

"Nothing," smiled StarWind as she gazed beyond HawkShadow. "Did you have any luck?"

"Same as you," shrugged HawkShadow. "Nobody has seen General Didyk or anyone resembling him. You would think that someone would remember him. Perhaps Khadoratung was not his destination."

"Oh it was," grinned Mistake.

HawkShadow and StarWind both glanced at the diminutive Fakaran.

"Explain," HawkShadow said.

"He arrived three days ago," reported Mistake. "He spent one

night in an inn and then left, but he did not leave the city."

"How do you know this?" inquired StarWind.

"I had a long conversation with one of the merchants," answered Mistake. "He seems to know everything that goes on in Khadoratung. The general asked a lot of questions about the Lords' Council, as if he was seeking an audience with one of its members. Wendal could not tell which lord the general was searching for."

"Where is this merchant Wendal?" asked HawkShadow.

"He has gone home for the day," shrugged Mistake. "I do not know where he lives, but his stall is in the canter of the last row of stalls. He sells expensive art objects."

"How does he know that the general is still in the city?" questioned StarWind.

"His horse is still at the inn that he stayed at the first night," replied Mistake. "Some men came to get him the second day he was here. He has not been back since."

"And this merchant just happens to…" StarWind began.

"You have done well, Mistake," interrupted HawkShadow with a broad smile. "Keep your ears open. If you hear any more, let us know."

"Where are you staying?" asked Mistake.

"We haven't decided yet," answered HawkShadow. "I suppose one of the inns around the marketplace will do. Where are you staying?"

"I think I will stay at the Wine Press," answered Mistake. "They treated me well at the midday meal today."

"Perhaps we will stay there, too," nodded HawkShadow. "Maybe we will see you there for the evening meal."

"That would be nice," Mistake said with a slight frown.

Mistake knew enough to understand that she was just dismissed. She smiled slightly and turned to visit the merchant stalls that were quickly closing for the day. HawkShadow took StarWind's arm and let her away from the marketplace.

"Why did you cut me off back there?" StarWind asked when they were alone. "Don't you think it odd that a merchant keeps tabs on the horses of guests at the inns?"

"Most assuredly," declared HawkShadow. "This Wendal is more than a merchant. Of that I am sure, but Mistake does not understand that. I do not know why he confided in her, but I did not want to poison that relationship. If we put our doubts about Wendal into her mind, I am sure that he would detect her change in attitude and stop giving her information."

"All right," agreed StarWind, "but I want to know more about him. Who is he working for? And why did he share information with Mistake?"

“Very good questions,” shrugged HawkShadow. “We will take turns observing him tomorrow.”

“If General Didyk is meeting with the Lords’ Council,” frowned StarWind, “it may mean that the truce between Omunga and Sakova will not last long.”

“I doubt the Lords’ Council would meet with an Omungan general,” mused HawkShadow, “but he might get an audience with a member of the Lords’ Council. From what I have heard, Khadora is little different than Omunga in the way that the powerful people vie against one another.”

“The question is what a lord of Khadora would have to gain from such a meeting,” posed StarWind. “Omunga has little to offer Khadora. There can be no leverage in dealing with Omunga that one lord could gain over another.”

“That is what bothers me the most,” HawkShadow said pensively. “Dealing with Omunga means little to Khadorans, so the general’s worth is in what he can do for Khadora. What can he do for Khadora?”

“He is not here to find an ally to aid Omunga in taking over Khadora,” shrugged StarWind. “Nothing would force the Khadoran clans to join together quicker than a threat of invasion from Omunga. He would find no ally here.”

“The last thing Omunga would want is a united Khadora,” nodded HawkShadow. “That is something the Omungans fear.”

“Which is exactly what Lord Marak is trying to do,” StarWind pointed out excitedly. “The general is here to warn the lords that Lord Marak is working against the Khadorans. Perhaps he is telling them that Lord Marak is working with the Sakovans. That way the lords will seek to eliminate the only person capable of uniting the country.”

“There is no way that General Didyk could possibly know about our relationship with Lord Marak,” HawkShadow shook his head. “That would mean that we have a spy deep in StarCity. I cannot believe that.”

“That is the beauty of it,” StarWind explained. “Didyk doesn’t have to know about Lord Marak and us. He can just make it up. Do you think the Khadorans would ask for proof?”

“Then whichever lord General Didyk is meeting with, he is Lord Marak’s enemy,” nodded HawkShadow. “We must find out where the general is.”

“Let us turn in for the night,” suggested StarWind. “Tomorrow we will keep watch on Wendal. I have a feeling that he will lead us to General Didyk.”

“That sounds like a plan,” agreed HawkShadow. “Let’s keep Mistake out of this, though. This game could get rough before it ends,

and I don't want her hurt."

"You like her, don't you?" smiled StarWind.

"Very much so," grinned HawkShadow. "She is much like MistyTrail. That can also be a problem. Sometimes MistyTrail has a little bit too much faith in other people. It may get her killed someday."

"She was right about Lyra," StarWind pointed out. "Maybe she has better sense than you give her credit for."

"I hope that is true," conceded HawkShadow. "I have grown quite fond of her."

A block away, a woman merchant was packing up her stall and bumped into Mistake.

"Sorry," said the merchant. "I didn't see you there. Did you want something before I close?"

Mistake sighed and dropped the air tunnel she had been using to spy on the Sakovans. She smiled at the woman and shook her head.

"No thank you," Mistake said pleasantly as she turned and headed for the Wine Press Inn.

* * *

"Time for the evening meal," announced Lord Marak. "Let's go sample the foods of Khadoratung."

"The soldiers are not allowed to eat with you," Latril pointed out. "They must eat downstairs."

"Then we shall all eat downstairs," shrugged Lord Marak. "What is the problem?"

"While you may feel like one of the soldiers," Latril frowned, "you are not. You are the lord of the Torak clan. You cannot win the hearts of the other lords by acting like a soldier. You must mingle with them and learn about them. Only then can you learn what motivates them."

"I fear that I already know what motivates them," frowned Lord Marak.

"She is right," interjected Botal. "You are viewed as an outsider here. Not only an outsider, but a strange one at that. Eat with the other lords. Talk with them. Joke with them. For all appearances, become one of them. Only then will they listen to any of your words."

"You are right," sighed Lord Marak. "I will dine with the lords. Latril, you will accompany me."

Lord Marak and Latril left the Torak quarters and walked to the Lords' Dining Room. Unlike the room for the soldiers, which had long tables and benches, the Lords' Dining Room had fine tables with seating for four or eight. The tables were made of fargi wood shined to a mirror finish. Comfortable leather chairs surrounded the tables, and each table was adorned with candles and flowers.

Lord Marak halted when he entered the dining room. The loud

din of conversation ceased when everyone noticed that he had entered. The Torak lord viewed the room quickly and chose to sit at an empty table. Slowly the conversations started anew, and Lord Marak was sure that he was now the topic of conversation at each and every table. An Imperial soldier hurried over and presented himself.

"Would you and your guest care for fish or wasooki, Lord Marak?" the Imperial soldier asked.

Lord Marak glanced briefly at Latril before answering, "Wasooki."

The Imperial soldier nodded perfunctorily and retreated. Lord Marak appeared to be gazing casually around the room as he wove an air tunnel. He moved the air tunnel from table to table to eavesdrop on the conversations.

"Try the table in the corner," Latril whispered. "You will find this interesting."

Lord Marak chuckled inwardly as he adjusted the air tunnel. He had not thought that Latril would also be spying. Suddenly, he dropped his air tunnel and turned to Latril.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"I wasn't sure," admitted Latril. "I have always thought your grasp of understanding magic and what your mages must go through was uncanny for someone with no skill, yet male mages are unknown to us."

"So if male mages are unknown," probed Lord Marak, "what made you think I could use magic?"

"That is why I suggested listening to the corner table," smiled Latril. "They were just discussing some male mage known as Aakuta. If indeed one exists, why not others? And if any exist, surely you must be one."

"Your logic is flawless," Lord Marak remarked as he wove his air tunnel again and focused on the corner table.

The conversation halted abruptly as one lord rose and stormed out of the room.

"What were they saying?" asked Lord Marak.

"It appears that Lord Druck, who just left, had trouble with this Aakuta," Latril explained. "He said the dark mage destroyed a squad of his soldiers and stole one hundred thousand gold coins from him."

"How did this mage destroy the soldiers?" questioned Marak.

"They found the bodies burned beyond recognition," frowned Latril. "Horses and soldiers in one heap. This was on a road, so I do not think they were burned in a building or from ordinary fire. The description is accurate as to what some of our mages can do."

"This dark mage stole money from Lord Druck?" asked Lord Marak.

"Not exactly," Latril shook her head. "It was payment for healing

the lord's son. The other lord, Lord Faliman, had recommended Aakuta. Now it appears they are enemies."

"This is something that we must learn more about," Lord Marak declared as he moved his air tunnel to a different table. "When we contact Fardale, I want to let everyone know that we want information on this Aakuta."

"I did learn about a garden behind the palace," offered Latril. "Perhaps we can go out there tomorrow and contact Fardale."

"You should not go alone," frowned Lord Marak. "And if we go together, people will get the wrong impression of who you are."

"You are doing more talking than listening," giggled Latril. "That is already what they all think. Have you not noticed that I am the only woman here?"

Lord Marak's eyes opened wide with understanding. He started to rise, but Latril placed her hand on his arm.

"Let them think what they want," she whispered. "Perhaps that will keep them from understanding the truth."

"You are a strong woman, Latril," smiled Lord Marak, "but there is a demand I must make of you."

"What is that?" asked Latril.

"Your knowledge of my skills must remain between you and me," declared Lord Marak. "It is too soon for others to know."

"I shall not speak of it," promised Latril, "but do not be surprised if others discover it. You have many intelligent mages in your service. Do not underestimate them."

"I never have," grinned Lord Marak.

"Ah, Lord Marak," came a familiar voice from behind him. "May I sit with you?"

Lord Marak turned to see Lord Shamino, the Sorgan lord. He waved his hand towards an empty chair.

"By all means, Lord Shamino," replied Lord Marak. "This is the first time for both of us."

"That sure started a new buzz among the lords," Latril said softly. "They are surprised that anyone would sit with you, especially a neighbor."

"Keep listening," whispered Lord Marak as the Sorgan lord sat down. "We will talk about this when we return to our quarters."

"The palace is quite exciting," Lord Shamino said loudly as he smiled at Lord Marak. He lowered his voice to a whisper and continued, "Many lords are questioning me about the Torak clan in general, and about you in particular. What should I be telling them?"

"What have you told them?" asked Lord Marak.

"I feigned ignorance as best I could," answered Lord Shamino. "I told them that I have just assumed leadership of the Sorgan clan, but

that Lord Quavry appeared to get along rather well with you."

"You told them that?" questioned Lord Marak.

"Well, he did appear to get along well with you," chuckled Lord Shamino. "I did not mention that appearances could be deceiving."

"You are treacherous," chuckled Lord Marak, "but you do bring up a good point. I need to set the tone for our other lords. Can you contact each of them without raising eyebrows?"

"Easily," smiled Lord Shamino. "It is you that everyone is watching. What do you want me to tell them?"

"Ask each of them to stop by my quarters sometime tonight," answered Lord Marak. "It is fine for them to act indifferently for now, but I will need them to express support for me at some point. That time may well be tomorrow."

"I shall do so right now," responded Lord Shamino as he pushed back his chair and rose.

Moments later the food was served and Lord Marak observed the assembled lords as he ate. After they had finished eating, lords started approaching the table one at a time. Most of them offered a bland welcome to the palace and fished for information. Lord Marak was polite to each as he tried to gauge their alignments with the other clans. One older lord in yellow and blue pulled back a chair and sat down.

"So you are Lord Marak," the lord said without emotion. "You are young for a lord. How have you come into power?"

"You have the advantage, sir," retorted Lord Marak. "I recognize your colors as the Dilendro clan, but I am afraid that I do not know your name."

"Lord Chandra," replied the man. "Do not feel bad about it. People do not discuss me as they do you. You, sir, are rocking the boat here in Khadora. What is this nonsense about freeing your slaves? Is this true?"

"It is," nodded Lord Marak as he tried to get a feel for the old man. "I find that free men are better workers than slaves. You should try it."

"I think I will wait to see how you fare first," replied Lord Chandra. "Evidently it is not working for you."

"Why do you say that?" puzzled Lord Marak.

"I heard that you raised your prices on watula," replied Lord Chandra. "Now that is a sure sign of a failing estate. You had best rethink your methods. Slavery is used because it provides cheap labor."

"Well," smiled Lord Marak, "if I fail, many lords would probably cheer. I do not intend to fail though, Lord Chandra. I believe that all people should be treated with dignity, and that includes slaves."

“You may fail, or you may not,” shrugged Lord Chandra. “It matters little to me, but others have already matched your price increases, and that matters a great deal to me. My clan is not a wealthy one. We survive mostly because nobody wants what we have. If they did, we would have been conquered long ago. These price increases just might be the death of my clan.”

“How many slaves do you have, Lord Chandra?” asked Lord Marak.

“Only a handful,” answered the Dilendro lord. “They are all mages. I had two of each discipline, but two have died in the last year. I am afraid they are aging like everything else on my estate, but your increases will hasten the demise of my people. I ask you to reconsider.”

“How much watula do you consume in a year?” asked the Torak lord.

“Not a great deal,” replied Lord Chandra. “Normally I would wait you out and harvest my own small fields, but the locust plague has destroyed my crops. That is what makes the timing of your increases so unfortunate. Half the country is being destroyed by the locusts.”

“Your mages cannot rid your fields of the locusts?” inquired Lord Marak.

“Of course not,” scowled the old man. “What kind of foolish question is that? I am afraid that you know little of being a lord.”

“Actually,” smiled Lord Marak, “I think not knowing how to be a lord might be a blessing for me. What would you say if I could solve all of your problems?”

“You?” laughed the old man. “You cannot even see the problems that you are creating for yourself. How can you solve mine?”

“I know of mages that can rid your fields of locusts,” retorted Lord Marak. “They would cost you less than the annual cost of keeping your current mages. I also know where you can sell the mages you do have for about the same price.”

“Are there mages that can really get rid of the locusts?” Lord Chandra asked skeptically.

“They will not charge you if they fail,” smiled Lord Marak. “You have nothing to lose by trying them.”

“Now you are saying something worth listening to,” Lord Chandra said, “but why would I sell my slaves?”

“Several reasons,” answered Lord Marak. “If you hire mages only when you need them, why pay to feed and house them all year long?”

“There is some sense to that,” agreed the old lord, “but there are things that cannot be solved by mages, like your price increases.”

“Do not be so sure of that,” grinned Lord Marak. “I would not spread this word around too much, but I intend to offer a generous

discount to any clan that is slave free. In fact, the cost of my goods to a clan who has no slaves will be considerably lower than last year's prices."

"Lower than last year's?" echoed Lord Chandra. "You certainly will face financial ruin."

"Perhaps," shrugged Lord Marak, "but is that any reason not to take advantage of me while you can?"

"Certainly not," laughed the old man. "If that is what it takes to get cheap prices out of you, my slaves are as good as sold. Where can I procure the services of these hired mages?"

"There is a mage school in Chantise," answered Lord Marak. "They buy mages and train them. Then they hire them out to clans that require their services. They are very skilled and very professional. It is called the Khadora School of Magic."

"I shall contact them on my way home," smiled Lord Chandra. "It has been a pleasure meeting you, Lord Marak. I hope you change your ways so that you are still with us next year, but don't start until I get my cheap goods."

"I promise that I won't change any time soon," laughed Lord Marak as Lord Chandra rose and left.

Several moments later, Latril whispered, "He is telling everyone about the discount he is getting from you."

"As I thought he might," chuckled Lord Marak. "I rather liked the spirit of that old man."

"There is an awful lot of talk tonight about prices," reported Latril. "I cannot imagine that a clan as small as the Toraks could have such an effect on prices. All of the clans are matching your increases."

"For some it is necessary," Lord Marak pointed out. "Along with the Sorgans, we hold a fair share of the watula market. Every estate needs watula so their prices have to go up to pay for our increase. Plus, there is basic human greed. If we can charge more and get away with it, others will seek to increase their profits. Remember, it is not only our watula that has been increased. All of our clans have raised prices on all of their commodities. Clova, wasooki, fish, lumber, lituks, all of it."

"But we do not have a major portion of all of those markets," countered Latril. "It would seem that some clan would seek to profit by charging lower prices."

"Oh some will," nodded Lord Marak, "and their goods will be in high demand, but after that supply is exhausted, where will the clans go?"

"How will they react when they find you are discounting everything?" questioned Latril.

"I am not sure," Lord Marak admitted. "We will find out soon. I

think tomorrow will bring news of the discounts to every clan. Then we shall see how they react."

"Some are reacting right now," frowned Latril. "There is anger from more than one lord about discounts for slave-free clans."

"Are they all angry?" questioned Lord Marak.

"No," replied Latril. "In fact, more than I would have suspected are intrigued by the idea. This is an education for me. I knew that mages were not thought highly of, but most of these lords express desires to be rid of them. They do not believe that magic works at all. If it wasn't fashionable to have your own mages, I do not think most clans would bother with them."

"Then we are about to make it unfashionable," grinned Lord Marak. "This evening meal has been an education for me, too. Let's return to our quarters so you can tell me what you have learned."

"Very well," responded Latril, "but a lot of it will not please you. While mages are not thought of as being useful, you are thought of as being harmful. Many a lord has expressed a need for something to be done about you."

"Did they have any suggestions?" Lord Marak asked as he rose.

"Many had suggestions," frowned Latril. "They had as many suggestions about what to do with you as there are ways of dying."

"You are just trying to cheer me up," Lord Marak quipped sarcastically. "We certainly have our work cut out for us."

"More than you can imagine, Lord Marak," Latril said. "Many a lord has asked how large your escort is. You may be safe in the Imperial Palace, but I would investigate different ways of returning to Fardale."

Chapter 11

Assembly of Lords

"What should we do while you are in the meeting chamber?" asked Botal.

"Roam around the palace," suggested Lord Marak. "Keep your ears open at all times. Perhaps we can pick up some tidbits that will prove useful. Have your men mix with the soldiers of other clans as much as possible. Latril, there are many staff members for the other lords that will not be in the meeting chamber. Find out where they congregate and listen in on their conversations. I want to gather as much information on the other clans as possible. This opportunity does not come often."

Latril nodded and Lord Marak left the quarters of the Torak clan. The Assembly of Lords was not due to start for an hour, but he wanted to be among the first to arrive. He strode down the long corridor and turned into the foyer. There were more than a few Imperial soldiers stationed in the foyer, but no other lords were visible. He opened the door to the Assembly Chamber and walked in.

The room was empty and Lord Marak stood for a moment as his eyes swept over the room. A feeling of apprehension washed over Lord Marak as he realized where he was. The Assembly of Lords was a gathering of the heads of all Khadoran clans. Only the Lords' Council and the Emperor stood above the group that would soon file into this grand room.

He walked over to the chair that Chard and pointed to the previous day. As promised, Lord Marak's name was engraved upon the chair. He sat down and examined the desk and small table. Writing instruments were on the desk as well as a candle. The small table held a glass and a pitcher of water.

Lord Marak sat in silence as he tried to gather his thoughts. He had managed to pick up enough information to understand how the meeting would be run, but he still pondered nervously the type of reception his words were likely to bring. The attitudes of the lords were as diverse as their clan colors. Lord Marak realized that he would find a few lords who might be receptive to freeing their slaves, as Lord Chandra had been the night before, but many more would find the thought repugnant and dangerous. While he never heard of a lord being attacked in the Imperial Palace, he was thankful for the large group of Imperial soldiers outside the room.

As the time for the meeting approached, lords began entering the chamber through the multitude of red doors. Lord Mark wove an air tunnel and sat in the back of the room directing the tunnel towards various groups of lords as they entered and greeted one another. To anyone gazing at him, he appeared to be lost in thought, but Lord Marak was rapidly identifying which lords might prove to be enemies and those who could become friendly with the proper persuasion.

"Good morning, Lord Marak," Lord Shamino said as he took his place next to Lord Marak. "You are here early."

"I wouldn't want to miss anything," Lord Marak smiled. "How are the other lords accepting you as the new lord of the Sorgan clan?"

"Mostly with disinterest," shrugged Lord Shamino. "I do not think that Lord Quavry had many friends. Some lords who did know him pressed for details of his death."

"What did you tell them?" asked Lord Marak.

"The truth," grinned Lord Shamino. "I said that he died during the night in his chambers."

"You have the qualities of a lord of Khadora," chuckled Lord Marak. "Who was most interested in his death?"

"There were several," replied the Sorgan lord. "The most persistent was Lord Patel of the Nordon clan. He is a member of the Lords' Council."

"Interesting," mused Lord Marak. "Which one is he?

"Front row," answered Lord Shamino. "His clan colors are green and white."

"I see him," Lord Marak said softly as he adjusted the air tunnel to listen to the conversation Lord Patel was having.

"Lord Marak," greeted Lord Sevrin as he entered the Assembly Chamber. "What are you doing sitting here in the back?"

"It is my assigned seat," replied Lord Marak. "Why do you find that strange?"

"The rear is usually for those lords who only have a single estate," frowned the Ragatha lord. "You are more powerful than that."

"Powerful?" questioned Lord Shamino.

"Certainly," nodded Lord Sevrin. "Seating in the Assembly of Lords is not accidental. There is scheme to it. The most powerful occupy the front row where everyone can see them. The members of the Lords' Council are always up front. As you move further back in the room, the clans become less powerful. At the very rear are those lords who only have a single estate. There has been a grievous mistake made here. You deserve to be moved forward quite a bit. Your holdings are on a par with mine. I shall speak to someone about this."

"No," Lord Marak declared. "Perhaps it is better that I am out of sight of everyone. I actually prefer to be seated back here. Let those

who need the limelight to reaffirm their importance sit up front. I am quite content here."

"Very well," frowned Lord Sevrin, "but the other lords would pay more heed to your words if you sat further forward."

Lord Sevrin departed and took his seat a third of the way forward. Lord Marak had just returned his attention to his air tunnel when he was again interrupted.

"So you are Lord Marak," greeted the Morgar lord. "I am Lord Saycher. I am your neighbor at your Raven's Point estate."

"Greetings, Lord Saycher," Lord Marak said. "I apologize for not coming out and visiting you since we took control at Raven's Point. It has been on my agenda, but time seems to slip by so quickly."

"No apology is needed," smiled Lord Saycher. "I have had perennial problems with the Situ when they controlled Raven's Point. The Toraks appear to be a much better neighbor. Your lord at Raven's Point has been over several times, and I have visited Raven's Point several times. I found your people to be most cordial and willing to discuss things. It is refreshing after dealing with Lord Ridak."

"I am very pleased to hear that," smiled Lord Marak. "I, too, found Lord Ridak rather hard to deal with."

"No doubt you did," laughed lord Saycher. "The one thing that I have not been able to pry out of your people is how you came into possession of Raven's Point. Nobody seems to want to discuss it."

"There is little to discuss," shrugged Lord Marak. "I defeated Lord Ridak in battle. Raven's Point was part of my spoils."

"Yet you let the Situ hold onto some of their other estates," mused Lord Saycher. "Why?"

"I had no desire to eradicate the Situ clan," replied Lord Marak. "They have a rich heritage as do most of the clans of Khadora. I think it is important to maintain that heritage."

"You have odd notions for a lord," Lord Saycher said. "Still you did take Raven's Point from them."

"I had a use for Raven's Point," smiled Lord Marak. "I am sure that you have seen my ships off the coast. Fardale is certainly not suited to sailing."

"Hardly," nodded the Morgar lord. "I have indeed seen your ships, and they puzzle me. They are rather large ships. It hardly makes sense to ship cargo by water in Khadora. The roads are quite adequate. What do you do with your ships? Surely they are not fishing vessels?"

"I do have fishing vessels at Raven's Point," answered Lord Marak, "but I also have larger ships for moving cargo. As for the roads being adequate, I have lost three caravans recently on the roads of Khadora. That alone reinforces my desire to have ships to move my

goods."

"Ah," nodded Lord Saycher. "I had not heard of your losses. I should think your troops could stop others from stealing your goods."

"The attacks were not meant to be thefts," retorted Lord Marak. "The caravans were destroyed, and the traces of the attacks removed. You see, Lord Saycher, I am at war. The problem is, I do not know the name of my enemy."

"Not thefts?" echoed Lord Saycher. "That is dastardly and cowardly. Such warfare is unheard of in Khadora. I have a very good relationship with Lord Quilo of the Organila clan. He is a member of the Lords' Council. I will speak to him about this matter."

"I appreciate that," Lord Marak smiled thinly, "but I feel that this is something that I must address myself. I cannot impose on the Lords' Council every time I have a problem."

"This is not just a problem, Lord Marak," frowned Lord Saycher. "You must be well aware that there are many lords in Khadora that would wish you dead. I must say that your ideas are radical, and I implore you to reevaluate them, but some of them hold promise. I do not mean the slavery issue of course, but opening up negotiations with your neighbors rather than going to war is something that is long overdue in Khadora. Besides, if some other clan defeats the Toraks, I am apt to have another new neighbor at Raven's Point, and I am quite happy with the one I have now."

"I am pleased to hear your words, Lord Saycher," smiled Lord Marak. "If I cannot come to a settlement with my enemy soon, I shall talk with you again about your friend on the Lords' Council."

"Very well," Lord Saycher nodded. "I had better take my seat now. I think the meeting is about to begin."

Throughout the large room, lords scurried to hurriedly take their seats. As soon as the room was orderly, horns rent the silence. A large door at the back of the stage opened and Imperial troops flowed onto the stage. The troops fanned out symmetrically and took up positions. A striking figure in white and gold followed the soldiers. He marched regally forward and stood at the edge of the stage. Lord Marak knew the entrance was merely for show, but he admired the effect it had on the assembled lords. The room was totally silent.

"Fellow Lords of Khadora," the voice of the Emperor boomed naturally, "welcome to this Assembly of Lords. Once again I am happy to report that Khadora is in fine shape. Our borders are secure, our commerce is healthy, and our rivalries are subdued."

A few lords chuckled over the Emperor's words, but glares from the other lords soon silenced them.

"There are some new faces among us," Emperor Bagora continued, "and for the first time in generations, a new clan in

Khadora. I am sure that all have already heard of the Torak clan, but I urge all of you to welcome all of the new faces among us. This is a rare opportunity for the lords of Khadora to meet in peace and discuss issues of importance in safety. As always, a member of the Lords' Council will direct this session of the Assembly of Lords. Lord Woton of Clan Neju will reside over this meeting."

The Emperor held out his hand invitingly towards Lord Woton. The Neju lord rose from his chair and climbed the steps to the stage. As Lord Woton walked to the center of the stage, the Emperor retreated to a throne at the back of the stage.

Lord Woton began the session by announcing the changes in Khadora since the last assembly. Mostly he centered on improvements to roads, bridges, and waterways. He avoided bringing up details of clan warfare, but he did announce new holdings of clans. When he stated the holdings of the Torak clan, quite a few lords grumbled in surprise.

Lord Marak appreciated the speech by Lord Woton as it informed him of many things he had been unaware of. He had not thought about who maintained the main roads and the waterways. He also had not heard of the massive locust plagues until the night before when Lord Chandra mentioned it.

After Lord Woton completed his speech, he opened the floor to the lords. The format of debate was fairly loose. Any lord could get up and address the assembly, or he could pose a question to another lord. The lord in question could refuse to answer, but most chose to step up to the stage to deliver their answers. Everything was quite orderly. Several hours into the meeting, Lord Faliman rose and posed a question to Lord Marak.

"Lord Marak," asked Lord Faliman, "prices in Khadora are rising at a furious rate. From what I have been able to determine, you started this horrendous trend. It is no secret that you have freed your slaves, but is that any reason to charge the rest of us more when we are in the middle of the worst plague in recent history?"

Lord Marak rose and made his way to the stage. He felt the eyes of all of the lords upon him as he climbed the steps and turned to face the assemblage. His eyes scanned the faces of the lords as he prepared to speak.

"Let me start by saying that the prices for my goods have nothing to do with the lack of slaves in the Torak clan," he began. "Since I freed my slaves, the productivity of the Torak estates has risen dramatically. In fact, Fardale was in danger of being abandoned when I took it over. Now it produces more watula than ever before, and it is a finer grade of crop. Those of you who purchase regularly from Fardale know of what I speak. So, Lord Faliman, it is not the lack of

slaves that are causing my price increases. Truthfully, we have experienced a great increase in demand for our products. That may well be a result of the locust plague for all I know."

Lord Marak scanned the faces of the lords to see how his message was being received before he continued.

"I did not learn of the locust plague until last night when Lord Chandra informed me of the troubles on his estate," Lord Marak continued. "I made an offer to Lord Chandra last night, and I am willing to make it to the rest of the lords here today. I firmly believe that the end of slavery is in the best interests of Khadora."

Shouts and insults forced Lord Marak to pause. Many lords were on their feet with raised fists as they hollered at the stage. Lord Marak decided to patiently wait out the angry outburst, but the Emperor's voice rang loudly through the room.

"I will have quiet in this chamber," demanded the Emperor. "Whether or not you care for what the lord is saying, he must be allowed to say it. Those are the rules of this assembly. I am sure there will be ample time during these meeting days to hear from others with opposing viewpoints."

The room fell silent again and the lords took their seats. Many faces still carried images of hatred and scorn, but Lord Marak continued.

"As I said," he continued, "I truly believe that Khadora will be a better country without slavery. To further that end, I am announcing a twenty percent discount off all Torak goods to any clan that renounces slavery and frees their slaves. I also encourage all other clans who are without slaves to offer the same terms on their goods."

The shouting started again, but it stopped suddenly when an Imperial soldier merely banged his pike upon the stage. Lord Marak turned to leave the stage when another lord stood and shouted a question.

"Before you leave the stage, Lord Marak, I have another question," shouted the lord.

Lord Marak nodded and returned to face the audience.

"You make a statement that slaves should be freed," the lord began, "but you do not say why. Even if you do see an increase in productivity, which I find ludicrous, you now have the added cost of paying for your labor. How does all of this benefit Khadora?"

"We are all familiar with the problem of getting an animal to do what we want instead of what it wants," replied Lord Marak. "It often takes more energy to move a stubborn mule than it does to do the work of the mule. It is not a matter of just telling the slaves that they are free and that we will now pay them for their labors. It is the total change in their attitude. These people are so thrilled to be free that

they will break their backs to do their best for you. That enthusiasm is also contagious. You will find that your free laborers will also work harder after you have freed your slaves. Several of the estates in the frontier area where I live have freed their slaves. Each and every one of them has shown a marked increase in productivity. How can the lords of Khadora ignore this evidence of what I am saying? If you doubt my words, try it on one of your estates. Buying back slaves will be easy for you to do. In fact, you will probably be able to buy them back cheaper as other lords will be getting rid of theirs."

"That still doesn't address the part about this being good for Khadora," the lord pressed.

"You are right," nodded Lord Marak. "I am not sure how to address this, but Khadora needs to unify. We cannot unite as a people when some of us own the rest of us. We heard the glowing report today about the safety of our borders. That speech will be inappropriate soon. Within our lifetimes Khadora will be engaged in a fight for our very survival. If we continue to bicker amongst ourselves, we will be defeated. I do not want to see that happen."

"How do you know this?" asked the lord. "Who is going to attack us?"

"I cannot answer those questions at this time," replied Lord Marak as he turned and left the stage.

The audience erupted in conversations again and Lord Woton sighed. He banged a pike on the floor of the stage to get everyone's attention.

"It is time for the midday meal," he announced. "We shall meet back here in an hour."

Lord Marak continued walking beyond his desk and out the door of the Assembly Chamber. He hurried to the Torak quarters and slid into the room.

"How did it go?" asked Latril.

"I am not sure," answered Lord Marak. "I think I handled the pricing and slavery issues fairly well, but the questions turned towards the invasion. That is a topic I am not prepared to discuss just yet. The meeting broke for the midday meal, but I am not anxious right now to be in the presence of other lords. I would prefer that they discuss my thoughts among themselves before hounding me. It will give me time to prepare for them."

"Shall we go visit the garden then?" asked Latril. "It might be a good opportunity to find out what is happening at Fardale."

"An excellent idea," nodded Lord Marak.

"Make sure the door is locked this time," urged Latril as she stepped out of the suite. "We don't want anything else to turn up missing."

“I am quite sure it was locked yesterday,” frowned Lord Marak. “Why someone would enter and steal one of my Sakovan stars is beyond me. Let’s get to the garden before some lord corners me with questions that I would rather not answer.”

Lord Marak and Latril made their way out the back of the palace and into the Imperial Gardens. The gardens were lush and well cared for. Paths wound their way through tall hedges. Flowers beds dotted the landscape and benches were set under tall shade trees. It was a beautiful and peaceful place.

Latril wove an air tunnel to Fardale as she sat next to Lord Marak on one of the benches. When she made the connection there was a short pause while someone summoned Lord Marshal Yenga.

“Are you safe?” asked the Lord Marshal.

“I am,” answered Lord Marak. “I may be stirring up a hornet’s nest here, but I do not feel in danger yet.”

“Well you are,” replied Yenga. “Our troops successfully turned the tables on the ambushers. Your enemy is Lord Patel of the Nordon clan, and he is a member of the Lords’ Council.”

“Do we have a prisoner who will talk?” questioned Lord Marak.

“We have two,” Yenga responded, “but there is more. When our troops were cleaning up and interrogating the prisoners, they were interrupted by a mediator from the Lords’ Council. It was Katzu, the one who came to Watula Valley over the Sorgan conflict.”

“I remember him,” responded Lord Marak. “So is this knowledge public now?”

“No,” Yenga replied with a suppressed chuckle. “Katzu is a witness and has promised not to divulge the information until he hears from you. I think that might help you in negotiations with the Lords’ Council.”

“There may not be negotiations,” frowned Lord Marak. “What estate did the ambushers come from?”

“They are from the main estate of the Nordon clan,” answered the Lord Marshal, “but they used a small Nordon estate to launch the attack. It is located near Deep Bend.”

“What is the size of the Nordon forces posted there?” inquired the Torak lord.

“Around two cortes,” answered Yenga. “It is a minor Nordon estate. It is primarily an apple orchard although they do grow some other crops. Lord Patel does not bother with large detachments at his smaller estates. Common thinking is nobody would be fool enough to attack a member of the Lords’ Council.”

“Once again I believe we will shatter common thinking,” vowed Lord Marak.

“Think long and hard about this, Lord Marak,” warned Lord

Marshal Yenga. “You will be inviting open warfare with a member of the Lords’ Council. His armies are large enough to crush all of your clans. You may temporarily hold one of his small estates, but he will crush you.”

“Have the two cortes that were sent with the caravan regroup near Deep Bend,” ordered Lord Marak. “They are to stay out of sight and keep in contact with you. Their mage is to speak to you twice daily. Is that understood?”

“It is,” Lord Marshal Yenga replied with worry in his voice. “There is more. Fisher reported that several eastern estates are flush with Jiadin warriors. He spotted at least three estates overflowing with Jiadin. He estimates around five thousand per estate. Is there a chance that someone is trying to continue Grulak’s plan?”

“I don’t know,” Lord Marak replied as he heard footsteps approaching. “Try to find out.”

Lord Marak signaled Latril, and she changed the pressure in the air tunnel so that Lord Marshal Yenga could still hear, but his voice would not come through. She didn’t want him to be concerned with an abrupt ending to the conversation.

“Lord Marak,” greeted the Imperial soldier. “I have been sent to notify you that Emperor Bagora would like to see you. You can go up the staircase nearest the entrance to the palace when you get back inside. At the top of the staircase, turn to the left. Do you require an escort?”

“No,” Lord Marak shook his head as he stood. “Your directions should be good enough. Latril, return to our quarters, and I will return there shortly.”

Even though he had not requested an escort, the Imperial soldier accompanied Lord Marak as far as the back entrance to the palace. When Lord Marak went up the stairs, the Imperial soldier went down, presumably to get some food.

Lord Marak wondered what the Emperor would say to him when he arrived. The small amount of talking the Emperor had done during the morning session had revealed little about the man. The Torak lord was quite curious.

As Lord Marak reached the top of the staircase, he heard voices in the distance. He turned to his left and walked along a broad corridor with a number of doorways opening off of it. Lord Marak could see two Imperial soldiers standing halfway down the corridor. They appeared to be standing guard outside a doorway and Lord Marak assumed that is where the Emperor would be found. He strode purposely towards the guards.

Before Lord Marak reached the doorway, Emperor Bagora and Lord Woton stepped out of the room as if they were on their way to a

meeting. They were talking to each other in a friendly and jovial manner. Lord Marak frowned at being asked to a meeting and then abandoned. He shook his head in confusion as he gazed at the floor.

Suddenly, the air sang with the twirling of a star. Lord Marak's head snapped up in time to see the projectile sink into the neck of Lord Woton. Lord Woton screamed briefly before he fell to the floor. Everything happened at once. One Imperial guard dove at the Emperor, knocking his body back out of the corridor and into the room he had been leaving. Lord Marak spun around in search of the assassin, while the second Imperial guard ran and tackled Lord Marak.

Lord Marak wondered what was going on as running footsteps pounded from every direction.

"I've caught him," shouted the Imperial guard. "Get help immediately."

Chapter 12

To Free the Torak

The door to the Torak quarters in the Imperial Palace burst open, and Imperial soldiers filed in with swords drawn. Botal leaped to his feet, but an Imperial soldier held a sword to his chest.

"Nobody moves," shouted an Imperial soldier with gold trim on his uniform. "If you move, you die."

The Torak soldiers remained unmoving as the Imperial soldiers began gathering the Torak weapons and carrying them out of the room.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" asked Squad Leader Botal

"I am Marshal Chack of the Imperial Army," declared the soldier with gold trim. "My men are removing your weapons so that none of your men do anything foolish."

"And why would my men disobey the orders that weapons remain in our quarters?" questioned Botal. "None of them have violated any rules so far."

"That may be so," shrugged the Imperial Marshal, "but your lord has. He has attempted to assassinate the Emperor."

"That is preposterous," frowned Botal. "Lord Marak has no reason to wish harm upon the Emperor. And even if he did, he would never act in a dishonorable fashion. You are wrong."

"He also wouldn't miss," interjected Halman. "You said he attempted to kill the Emperor. The fact that the Emperor lives should be proof enough that Lord Marak is not the one that you seek."

"Be quiet, Halman," Botal said sharply. "Marshal Chack, I implore you to investigate this affair thoroughly before condemning Lord Marak. I know my lord well, and I will guarantee that he wishes Emperor Bagora no harm."

"You may rest assured that my investigation will be thorough," declared Marshal Chack as he picked up a Sakovan star from the desk, "but you may want to rethink your evaluation of Lord Marak. He was captured at the site of the attack, and Lord Woton was slain with one of these."

"Marshal," frowned Botal, "Lord Marak normally carries three of those stars in his waistband. When we arrived here and were told to leave our weapons, he deposited them on the desk. Last night when we returned from the evening meal, one was missing. I think somebody is trying to make it look like Lord Marak is the culprit."

“Why was this supposed theft not reported?” asked Marshal Chack.

“A star is hardly a valuable item,” shrugged Botal. “Besides there are supposedly only two keys to this room. I had one, and Lord Marak had the other. There were no signs that anyone broke in. Who would have believed that someone entered this room only to steal an insignificant star?”

“I can give no credence to your report,” Chack said. “There is no proof to your story, and it is too convenient after you learned of the assassination.”

“Are my men to be imprisoned then?” inquired Botal.

“No,” Chack shook his head. “The removal of your weapons is for your protection. Many a soldier would be expected to do some foolish thing to free his lord. I strongly advise against it, but you are free to come and go as you please. If you wish to leave the palace, inform me and your weapons will be returned outside the building.”

Marshal Chack picked up the last star and left the suite. Botal closed the door and turned to face his men.

“I do not want any of you do anything foolish,” sighed Botal. “That goes double for you two,” he added as he stared at Halman and Gunta. “I know what your first reaction is, but we must think things out before we act.”

“It is obvious that someone has planned this well,” responded Gunta. “We will not do anything foolish, but we will not allow Lord Marak to be executed either. We need a plan to find the real culprit.”

“Agreed,” nodded Botal. “Latril, report to Fardale and seek instructions from Lord Marshal Yenga. Halman, notify the other lords who owe allegiance to Lord Marak. I want word of this to come from us before they hear of it elsewhere. Gunta, you and I need to look at our drawings. I want to know where they are keeping Lord Marak.”

* * *

Mistake ran through the crowd of the marketplace as she sought StarWind or HawkShadow. Tears flowed from her eyes, and her vision became blurry. She stopped to wipe her eyes and felt a hand touch her shoulder.

“Why are you crying?” StarWind asked softly.

“Haven’t you heard?” sobbed Mistake. “There was an assassination attempt on the Emperor.”

“We heard,” HawkShadow said from the shadow of the alley. “The news is all over the marketplace. I heard one of the members of the Lords’ Council died instead. Do you know the Emperor? Is that why you are crying?”

“No,” Mistake shook her head. “They said it was Lord Marak who tried to kill the Emperor. They have arrested him. Now everything we

have worked for is ruined."

StarWind gasped audibly and bit her lip. "This is trouble," she said a moment later. "The lords will tear Marak limb from limb."

"No they won't," HawkShadow said with determination. "I won't give them the chance."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mistake with a glint of hope in her eye.

"I am going to get him out of the palace," HawkShadow said. "He has become as important to us as he is to Khadorans. I would not doubt that General Didyk is behind this."

"How are we going to get him out?" inquired Mistake.

HawkShadow emerged from the alley and stared at the small Fakaran. "We are not going to get him out," HawkShadow declared. "I am. This is no time to start teaching you what you need to know. You are best off pretending that you do not know us. The Imperial troops may be searching for us before the day is out. Come, StarWind, we have work to do and not much time to do it."

Mistake scowled at the Sakovans as they hurried away. She kicked a stone in anger as she stormed about being left out of the attempt to free Lord Marak.

"So you think Sakovans are better than Fakarans," Mistake whispered bitterly to herself. "We will see about that. Perhaps you will change your attitude when you find Lord Marak's cell empty when you get there."

Mistake dried her tears with a cloth and then composed herself. She forced a smile onto her face and made her way to Wendal's stall.

"You seem happy this morning," greeted Wendal. "I trust the Wine Press meets with your expectations."

"Very much so," smiled Mistake.

"So what do you have planned for today?" Wendal asked absentmindedly as he arranged the items on his table.

"I thought I would tour the Imperial Palace," Mistake answered cheerily.

"You had better think again," frowned Wendal. "You will not be allowed into the palace. Besides, there is disturbing news from there. Someone tried to assassinate the Emperor."

"No," Mistake said with feigned shock. "Why would anybody do that? I thought everybody loved the Emperor."

"Evidently not," shrugged Wendal as he watched Mistake for a reaction. "Some say that Lord Marak is the one who tried it."

"Well I hope they caught him," frowned Mistake. "There is enough killing in the world already. It certainly shouldn't happen in a fine city like Khadoratung."

"No it shouldn't," agreed Wendal. "I guess you will have to

change your plans."

"No," Mistake shook her head. "I can't. Rejji made such a big deal out of seeing the palace when he was here that I told him I would let him know what the inside looked like. I cannot go back in failure."

"I am sure that he will understand," shrugged Wendal. "He wouldn't want you hurt or killed for trying to sneak in."

"I was kind of hoping that you would know a way for me to get inside," pouted Mistake.

"Me?" chuckled Wendal. "What makes you think I could get you inside?"

"You enjoy a challenge," grinned Mistake. "Admit it. If you were in my position, would you return to Fakara without seeing the inside of the palace?"

"Probably not," laughed Wendal. "Still the timing is not good for such a prank."

"I will not get another chance before I leave," pleaded Mistake. "All I have to do is pop inside and back out again. How would you do it?"

"I would make them think I belonged inside," Wendal thought out loud. "Actually, the days of the Assembly are the best time to do it. Every clan is represented inside. The guards cannot possibly check everyone thoroughly."

"What do they look for when you go up to the door?" asked Mistake.

"Clan colors," answered Wendal. "Either you are a soldier or lord wearing the clan colors, or you have a pin that identifies your clan. Not all pins would get you inside, though. You would need an appropriate one and a good story to go along with it. When Rejji was here he wore such a pin that identified him as the bursar's boy."

"I remember him telling me that you wanted very badly to purchase it," nodded Mistake. "Do you have any?"

Wendal hesitated just a moment too long, and Mistake knew the answer to the question. Her lips spread wide in a big grin.

"How much?" she asked.

"I don't sell them," protested Wendal. "I collect them."

"Well how much to rent one?" Mistake persisted. "I won't need it for long."

Wendal stared at the diminutive Fakaran for a long time before answering.

He shook his head as he pulled a tray from behind his stall. "This is a stupid idea," he warned. "I am probably aiding you in suicide. What will Rejji think of me then?"

"If I die," laughed Mistake, "I promise that I won't tell him."

"You are incorrigible," laughed Wendal as he handed Mistake a

small blue and yellow pin that denoted a member of the lord's family. "This will identify you as a member of Lord Samert's family. He is the lord of the Vessi clan. Whatever you do, avoid any of the Vessi clan members. They will know immediately that you are a fraud. The best time to enter is just before a large group. Wait until you see such a group approaching one of the doors. Get in front of them, but do so naturally. The guards will want to dispense with you quickly so they can handle the larger group."

Mistake hugged Wendal and dashed off before he changed his mind. She stopped in an alley to attach the pin and frowned when she looked at her clothes. Nobody would believe that she was a member of a lord's family. Working her way around the row of inns, Mistake returned to the marketplace in a way that would keep her hidden from Wendal. She hurried through the stalls until she found the clothes she was looking for.

Mistake hurried back to her room at the Wine Press and changed into her new outfit. The corner of her mouth turned downward as she looked at herself. She wore a blue city-girl dress with a yellow belt and collar. Its short sleeves required her to leave her arm sheaths in the room. Feeling naked, Mistake raced down the stairs. The innkeeper stared at her as she dashed out the back door of the inn.

It was only a few blocks to the large park outside the Imperial Palace. Mistake halted there and watched the people coming and going. When she saw an appropriate group heading for the palace, she walked briskly to get in front of them. She marched right up to the doors and one of the soldiers stepped in front of her.

"This is the Imperial Palace," stated the guard. "What business do you have inside?"

"I need to see my father," scowled Mistake. "He did not give me enough gold to buy anything decent in the marketplace. You must take me to him immediately."

"And who is your father?" asked the guard as he stared at the small pin on her dress.

"Lord Samert, of course," Mistake said in an annoyed fashion. "Everybody knows that. You will have one of your men escort me to him immediately."

One of the other Imperial soldiers tried to stifle his laugh, but the squad leader talking to Mistake heard it. He turned and glared at the offending guard. The guard turned his face away in embarrassment, but he could not stop laughing. Eventually, even the squad leader's smile broadened.

"I cannot spare any men to escort you," said the squad leader. "Go up the steps inside and around to the left. There is a long corridor with doors on both sides. You will see the Vessi name on one of

them."

"Hmmph," spouted Mistake as the squad leader held the door open for her.

She marched inside and took a deep breath as the door closed. She could still hear the guards outside laughing.

"I wouldn't want to end up wedding that," laughed one of the men. "She would probably have me beat each night for dipping into my ale."

Mistake could not stifle a chuckle of her own as she moved across the entrance foyer and up the small flight of steps. She walked swiftly to avoid spending too much time in the wide-open area, but nobody paid any attention to her. She walked down the long corridor, swiftly scanning the names on the doors. She started sweating nervously and was almost at her wit's end when she finally saw the Torak door. Without knocking, she opened the door and stepped inside.

* * *

HawkShadow strode across the open field behind the Imperial Palace where thousands of troops were encamped. The field was ablaze with clan colors as each clan marked out an area for themselves. Some of the clans had large sections of the field roped off, while others sported nothing but a few tents and a banner in their clan colors.

HawkShadow's eyes roved constantly in search of one of Lord Marak's clans. Finally, he spotted the green and yellow of the Situ clan. He walked purposefully up to the tent and ducked inside. Three squad leaders were inside and one of them immediately pulled a sword.

"What are you doing in here?" demanded the man with the sword.

"My name is HawkShadow," declared the Sakova. "I am a friend of Lord Marak's. In case you have not heard, Lord Marak is being held prisoner inside the palace. I need your help to get him out."

"What game are you playing?" scowled the man with the sword.

"Let him speak," interrupted one of the other squad leaders. "I have seen this man in Fardale when Lord Rybak attended this last meeting. He is Sakovan."

"That is correct," nodded HawkShadow.

"We have heard about Lord Marak," the man said as he returned his sword to its sheath, "but there is little we can do about it. We are but a single corte of troops. We cannot stand against all of the lords of Khadora. Have you seen the field outside?"

"I walked across it," nodded HawkShadow. "I am not suggesting that we fight everyone to get him free. I plan to go in and get him out without anyone noticing."

“You are daft,” the first squad leader shook his head. “This is the Imperial Palace that you are talking about. They won’t even let you in there.”

“I will get in,” declared HawkShadow, “but I need one of your uniforms to do it.”

“One of our uniforms?” echoed the squad leader. “Tell us what your plan is and we will go do it. We are not afraid to put our lives on the line for Lord Marak.”

“I do not doubt your sincerity and loyalty,” smiled HawkShadow. “I would gladly tell you my plan if I had one. The first part is getting StarWind and myself into the palace. Then we will find Halman and Gunta. I know both of them well. We will put our heads together and develop a plan at that point. I just need a uniform to get us inside.”

“A uniform will work for you,” frowned one of the squad leaders, “but what about the girl?”

“I can handle that part,” assured HawkShadow. “Will you help me?”

“We will,” nodded the man. “Take my spare uniform. If there is any way that we can help, be it a diversion or an attack, we stand ready.”

“I do not know where Halman and Gunta are,” offered one of the other squad leaders, “but the Situ chamber is down the leftmost corridor. It is near the rear of the palace. They will know where the Torak clan is quartered.”

“Thank you,” nodded HawkShadow as he slipped into the Situ uniform.

HawkShadow left his weapons in the tent and crossed the field to meet up with StarWind. Together they approached one of the palace doors. The Imperial guards gazed at StarWind and stopped them from entering.

“What are you doing with her?” asked the Imperial guard. “She has no pin.”

“Lord Rybak has requested her,” HawkShadow explained. “She is an interpreter of dreams. Lord Rybak had a disturbing dream last night and has demanded that she be brought to him at once. I do not question my lord’s orders.”

“You are wise not to,” nodded the guard. “Do you know the way?”

“I do,” nodded HawkShadow.

The guard opened the door, and the Sakovans passed through it. HawkShadow acted as if he was escorting StarWind. Together they made their way to the Situ quarters. They knocked on the door and entered as soon as it opened. Lord Rybak looked at the intruders with a puzzled expression.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” apologized HawkShadow. “We need to find Halman and Gunta. Borrowing one of your uniforms was the easiest way to get into the palace.”

“You are the Sakovans,” Lord Rybak said with recognition. “Why do you seek Halman and Gunta?”

“To make a plan to free Lord Marak,” StarWind answered.

“You risk your lives for Lord Marak?” questioned Lord Rybak. “It should be us fighting to free him.”

“We do not plan to fight anyone,” retorted HawkShadow. “We would like to sneak him out of the palace without disturbing anyone. Halman and Gunta know him better than any, and they both know us well. I think together we have a chance.”

“If anyone in a Situ uniform is going to rescue Lord Marak,” smiled Lord Rybak, “it will be me. I will go with you.”

“No,” HawkShadow shook his head. “I know that there are many clans who would willingly die to free Lord Marak, but it is better if we do it. If we are captured, the Imperial troops cannot tie us to any clan. I will have removed this uniform before then. If you are caught, your people will suffer needlessly. At least let us try it first. If we fail, then you can do what you think is best.”

“Very well,” agreed Lord Rybak. “The Torak quarters are right next door. I will have one of my men check the corridor before you leave.”

“But right now, I am one of your men,” chuckled HawkShadow. “I will check it myself.”

HawkShadow and StarWind slipped out of the room and knocked on the next door. The door eased open and Botal gazed at HawkShadow for a moment before recognizing him. He swiftly opened the door wider and urged them in.

“It would appear that everyone in the world has heard about Lord Marak’s capture,” frowned Botal. “What are you two doing here?”

HawkShadow stood with his mouth hanging open as he gazed at Mistake in her blue and yellow dress.

“How did you get in here?” he asked.

“What took you so long?” retorted Mistake.

“Where is he being kept?” asked StarWind as she pointedly ignored HawkShadow and Mistake.

“We have drawings,” Gunta called from the center of the room as he leaned over the table. “Come take a look.”

* * *

The Imperial soldier carried a plate of food. He opened the door to the cell area and stepped inside. A guard met him with a drawn sword.

“What is this?” the guard asked.

“Slop for the lord,” chuckled the Imperial soldier. “Would you care to sample it?”

“Hardly,” laughed the guard. “Where did you get that? I have never smelled anything so foul.”

“I suppose some of the kitchen help has taken exception to anyone who would threaten our Emperor,” replied the soldier. “I can’t say as I blame them. He is fortunate to even be able to eat. Had I been on duty, that lord would not be able to talk.”

“You must learn to control you emotions better,” laughed the soldier as he pointed down the hall to where another guard was standing. “You can’t miss him. He is our only prisoner.”

The Imperial soldier marched down the hall. The other guard nodded as he saw the food plate approaching. He unlocked the door and held it open as the soldier swept into the cell.

“I am to wait until he finishes it,” the soldier whispered as he passed through the door. “Lock it back up until I knock.”

The guard complied and closed the door and locked it. Lord Marak looked up at the intrusion and frowned.

“Fisher?” he said softly. “What are you doing here? Are you crazy?”

“Perhaps,” smiled the spy, “but sometimes crazy works. There are only two guards outside. We should be able to get you out of here fairly easy.”

“No,” Lord Marak shook his head. “You get out of here before they catch you.”

“I am not leaving without you,” Fisher said stubbornly.

“You must,” sighed Lord Marak. “Don’t you see? I cannot escape from here. Oh, you may be able to free me, but then what? Everything we have worked so long for will be destroyed. Armies will descend upon the estates of the Torak clan. They will turn over every rock to find me, and they will crush anyone who gets in their way. Whoever set me up, did a very good job. I imagine that they want me to escape. Doesn’t it surprise you that there are only two guards for a prisoner that supposedly attempted to assassinate the Emperor? It is not like there is a shortage of Imperial troops.”

“You have a point there,” conceded Fisher, “but leaving you here is the same as watching you die. I cannot chance the loss of the Torak.”

“All the more reason for you to flee, Fisher,” Lord Marak shook his head. “I am not dead yet. I cannot imagine the Imperial troops hanging me without a thorough investigation. That means that my people still have a chance to do something. Get in touch with Botal. Tell them to find out who the real assassin is. This is an area that you excel at, Fisher. Work with the Emperor’s people. As much as they

hate me, and all that I stand for, they will still want to know who the real assassin is. You have your work cut out for you. Go do it."

"I will," nodded Fisher, "but I will not let them kill you. If need be, I will lead all of your people on Khadoratung and fight to save you."

"You will do no such thing," scolded Lord Marak. "In fact, I want word sent to Fardale immediately. None of my people are to make any moves against the Imperial troops or the Emperor. That is not what I am about. I want to unite this country, not destroy it."

"But they are flatlanders," frowned Fisher.

"Gather the believers and the nonbelievers," quoted Lord Marak. "Remember the scrolls that we have read. These people may seem like our enemies now, but a greater evil is coming. We must unite to survive. Go now."

Fisher banged harshly on the door. The guard opened it and Fisher stormed out.

"Lock him back up," snarled Fisher. "He refused to eat his slop so he will go hungry."

Both guards laughed as Fisher left the cell area. He placed the tray on the floor outside one of the clan quarters and continued on until he reached the Torak quarters. He banged on the door, and Botal shook his head as he let Fisher in.

"Who will be coming next?" Botal shook his head as he closed the door. "Perhaps a Chula would complete this cast."

"Fisher!" greeted StarWind. "Nice uniform. That may help us get Lord Marak out of here."

"It won't help at all," Fisher snapped as he stripped off the uniform. "I just came from Lord Marak's cell. He refuses to escape."

"What?" HawkShadow said with disbelief.

"It makes sense after you calm down a little," sighed Fisher. "Whoever is framing him, wants him to escape. There are only two guards, and I easily got into his cell."

"Why would they want him to escape?" asked Mistake.

"Nothing could destroy what he is doing more than branding him and his people as criminals," explained Fisher. "He wants us to solve the mystery of who really is behind the assassination."

"Well that's easy," StarWind quipped sarcastically.

Suddenly, a loud explosion rent the air. The whole palace shook, and dust filtered down from the ceilings.

Chapter 13

Emperor Bagora

Lord Marak watched Fisher leave the cell. As the door closed, he returned to his bunk and stretched out. He stared at the ceiling as he wondered if his people could find the real assassin in time to save him. His mother had never taught Lord Marak about religion, but he found his thoughts drifting to the god of the indigenous peoples. He wondered if the god Kaltara had really chosen him to be Torak, and if that meant that Kaltara would be looking out for his welfare. It was difficult for Lord Marak to believe in anything that he could not touch, but he found his nervousness strangely calmed as he thought about Kaltara. In fact, his spirits rose as he meditated.

Barely audible noises invaded his thoughts, and Lord Marak looked at the door to his cell. He heard distant shouting and then screaming. More shouts came from somewhere closer, probably right outside his door. He heard something slam against his door and then more screaming. Suddenly it was very silent.

Lord Marak remained frozen on his bunk when the small viewing slit in the cell door opened. Marak's eyes rose to stare at the slot in the door. A dark visage filled the slot as a pair of eyes scanned the room. The slot slammed closed, and Lord Marak wondered what was going on outside the cell.

Without warning, the cell door exploded inward. It flew across the small room and impacted the rear wall of the cell. Lord Marak's arms instinctively rose and covered his face as the whole building shook from the impact. The noise was deafening and Lord Marak shook his head as his ears rang loudly. In seconds it was all over. Lord Marak uncovered his head and looked about the tiny cell. Sunlight streamed through the rear wall of the cell where the cell door had torn through the stone wall. The sunlight highlighted the millions of dust particles that floated in the air.

Lord Marak rose off his bunk and gazed at the destruction. The cell door was gone, and he could see the remains on an Imperial guard in the corridor beyond. He ran to the door and gazed out. Another Imperial guard rested in an awkward position at the end of the corridor. His head was cocked at an impossible angle, and Lord Marak knew the man was dead.

Lord Marak strode to the hole in the rear of the palace and gazed out. He looked out into the garden behind the Imperial Palace and

saw a few people pointing towards him. He also saw Latril standing by a bench. Although there was nobody near her, Latril's mouth was moving rapidly. Marak realized that she was talking to Fardale. Swiftly, he wove an air tunnel of his own and directed it towards Latril.

"A male mage just destroyed my cell," he said hurriedly. "Fisher is in the palace, probably in our quarters. Tell him that he must leave the palace immediately. The Imperial soldiers will not take this breach in security very well."

Latril latched onto Lord Marak's air tunnel and adjusted it to work in both directions.

"The Sakovans and Mistake are here, too," she reported.

"Get them out of the palace," ordered Lord Marak. "It is not safe for anyone who does not belong here."

"Are you all right?" asked Latril. "You could just leave through that hole in the wall."

"Physically I am fine," replied Lord Marak. "I am not running from this battle. Hurry and get our friends out of here."

Lord Marak did not wait for a response. He abandoned the air tunnel and walked to his bunk. He sat down and waited to be discovered. Amazingly, it took nearly five minutes for the first Imperial soldier to arrive. The soldier stared at the hole in the wall before even noticing Lord Marak sitting on his bunk. He shouted for reinforcements.

Several Imperial soldiers ran into the cell and drew their swords. They did not threaten Lord Marak, but their presence was meant to ensure that he did not escape. A few minutes later, Marshal Chack stormed into the room. He glared at Lord Marak and then the hole in the wall.

"Bind his hands behind his back," ordered Marshal Chack. "And get some men in here to shore up this hole before the whole wall crumbles."

Lord Marak rose and turned his back to the soldiers. He placed his hands behind his back and waited for them to be tied. Marshal Chack waited until Lord Marak was bound before he walked to the hole in the wall and gazed out. He shook his head in confusion.

"Why didn't you run while you had the chance?" he asked Lord Marak.

"I will not flee from false charges," Lord Marak answered. "I have faith that your investigation will clear me and find the true assassin."

"You are a fool," snapped Marshal Chack. "Do you really think the Emperor will show you any mercy after your people have killed Imperial soldiers and destroyed the Imperial Palace? You will hang before nightfall."

“My people had nothing to do with this,” Lord Marak replied calmly. “Whoever framed me for the assassination wants me to escape. I will not oblige them.”

“Preposterous,” Marshal Chack responded as his face clouded over with doubt.

“What do we do with him now?” asked one of the soldiers. “Should we put him in another cell?”

Marshal Chack did not respond for several moments. Finally, he shook his head. “No,” the marshal said softly. “We will take him to see the Emperor. He is not leaving my side until he hangs. Bring him along.”

Two men stepped forward and grabbed Lord Marak by his arms. Marshal Chack strode out of the cell. The two soldiers guided Lord Marak as they followed. They climbed the staircase until they reached the top and proceeded to the Emperor’s office.

“Wait here,” Marshal Chack ordered the two soldiers as he opened the door to the office and walked in.

After a rather long wait, the marshal opened the door and ordered his men to bring Lord Marak into the room. He then asked the men to wait outside the door. Lord Marak noticed the Emperor staring at him. He met the Emperor’s gaze without emotion.

“There are very serious charges against you, Lord Marak,” stated the Emperor. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Only that I am innocent of the charges,” declared Lord Marak. “I have no wish to see you harmed, Emperor Bagora. I hope that your investigation will prove the truth of my words.”

“Investigation?” questioned the Emperor. “What need do we have for an investigation when you were caught at the scene of the attack?”

Lord Marak’s face frowned with worry. “You must investigate,” he demanded. “If you just assume that I am the assassin, your life will remain in danger. Even if you do not care what happens to me, you certainly must care for your own life.”

“So you think this mysterious assassin will try to strike me again?” the Emperor retorted with disbelief. “You told Marshal Chack that you thought someone was framing you for the assassination. If that is to be believed, then how can you justify your thoughts that I would be attacked again? There would be no need for another attack if you are already set to pay for the crime.”

“Unless my enemy is yours as well,” Lord Marak pointed out. “Can you dismiss the possibility that an enemy would like to see you dead and have me blamed for it?”

“I cannot,” conceded the Emperor, “but neither am I ready to accept it as fact. You were the only person present during the attack. You have already made it quite clear that you dislike the way Khadora

is being run, and the weapon used to kill Lord Woton is undoubtedly yours. Why should I waste my time discussing your innocence?"

"The weapon was stolen from my quarters during the evening meal last night," Lord Marak replied.

"And you failed to report it," interrupted Marshal Chack. "That is hardly believable."

Emperor Bagora turned and stared at the marshal. "How do you know he failed to report it?" he asked.

"Squad leader Botal gave me the same story when I gathered their weapons," answered the marshal. "Supposedly they thought the loss was too insignificant to bother reporting it."

"A star is hardly a valuable item," interjected Lord Marak. "I bought my first one right here in the marketplace in Khadoratung when I was but a soldier under Lord Ridak."

"Has Lord Marak had any visitors since he was captured?" asked the Emperor.

"Of course not," Marshal Chack shook his head.

"Then I find it interesting that their stories regarding the theft agree," stated the Emperor. "Continue, Lord Marak."

"As for being at the scene of the assassination," Lord Marak continued, "I was here because you sent for me."

"I sent for you?" interrupted the Emperor. "That is a patent falsehood. I did not send for you."

"But that is what I was told," frowned Lord Marak.

"Who told you that the Emperor wished to see you?" asked Marshal Chack.

"An Imperial soldier," answered the Torak lord. "I was in the garden with Latril. This was during the midday meal break from the assembly. We went out there to talk, and a soldier informed that the Emperor had asked to see me. He gave me directions and then asked if I required an escort. I declined the escort, but he still walked with as far as the staircase. I ascended the stairs and he went down. A moment later is when the assassination took place. I saw you and Lord Woton exit this room. I remember feeling disappointed that you were leaving when you had asked to speak to me. I heard the song of a star flying through the air and then looked up to see Lord Woton fall. A soldier pushed you into this office. I turned to search for the assassin and was then tackled and arrested."

"What did this supposed Imperial soldier look like?" asked Marshal Chack.

"He was tall," answered Lord Marak. "He had red hair and a rather square face. I do not remember anything else remarkable about him."

Marshal Chack walked to the door and eased it open. He said

words to the soldiers outside, but Lord Marak could not hear them. He closed the door and walked to the window and stared out. The Emperor nodded to himself as he observed the marshal's actions.

"Your story will be checked," declared the Emperor. "That still does not address your motive."

"I have no motive to see you dead," Lord Marak stated. "Yes, there are parts of Khadoran culture that I find distasteful and wasteful, but killing you would not alter those practices one bit. The government of Khadora has been nothing if not helpful to my rise to power. You allowed me to start the Torak clan, and you have not stopped me from running my estates as I see fit. What grudge could I possibly have against you?"

"We sanction slavery," replied the Emperor. "Can you deny that you hate the practice? If you see me as standing as a symbol for the slavery that you hate, most lords would accept that as a motive to strike me down."

"Hate is a very strong word, Emperor," frowned Lord Marak, "but you are correct in describing my abhorrence of slavery. Still, that does not mean that I hate those who employ it. I see them as misguided, but my weapon against them is reason. You heard my words in the assembly this morning. I offer my estates as proof of the efficiencies of a slave-free Khadora. I have offered discounts for my goods to any clan that rids itself of slaves. Not once did you hear me threaten anyone because they owned slaves. I am a warrior, Emperor, and I know how to wage a battle, but I only fight when I am forced to. I prefer negotiations to battle."

"Yet you did fight the Situ clan to free your mother from slavery," posed the Emperor. "Is that not correct?"

"It is not correct," declared Lord Marak. "I purchased my mother's freedom. I battled the Situ clan because Lord Ridak refused to accept a ruling of the Lords' Council. Instead he sent his armies to Fardale to crush me. He miscalculated."

The Emperor looked to the marshal for verification and the marshal nodded. "I stand corrected, Lord Marak," conceded the Emperor. "Will you approach my desk and verify that the star upon it is yours?"

Lord Marak looked to the marshal for permission to move, but Chack stood far away at the window and did not bother to even turn around. Lord Marak walked towards the massive desk and gazed down at the star upon it.

"It certainly looks like mine," agreed Lord Marak, "but it has been altered."

The Emperor frowned and reached for the star.

"Don't touch it," warned Lord Marak causing the Emperor to

hesitate and the marshal to turn and stare at Lord Marak. “The alterations that I speak of are the brown stains on each of the tips of the star. Unless I am mistaken, that star was dipped in poison. I assume that any wound caused by it would result in certain death.”

“How could it be thrown then?” questioned the marshal. “Surely you would chance a nick of your own skin just by gripping it?”

“Absolutely,” nodded Lord Marak. “If I were to use such a weapon, I would make sure that my hands were gloved.”

The Emperor drew his hand back and nodded as he swallowed hard. Lord Marak turned and walked back to where he had been positioned by Marshal Chack. A knock sounded on the door and the marshal hurried over to it. He opened it only slightly and spoke to someone on the other side. The Emperor waited patiently for the marshal to return.

“Latril validates your story about the garden,” Marshal Chack said as he closed the door and walked back to the window. “In fact, she noticed a slight detail that you did not. She described a slight scar on the back of the man’s neck.”

“Do you know this soldier?” the Emperor asked the marshal.

“I do,” Chack answered. “I sent men to find him and bring him here. We will get to the bottom of this foul mess.”

“Untie Lord Marak’s hands,” ordered the Emperor. “I think there is sufficient evidence to support his innocence.”

The marshal moved to obey, and Lord Marak gazed around the room as he waited. The office was extremely large and rather sparsely furnished. A massive desk sat near one end of the room with two chairs in front of it. At the far end of the room was a comfortable reading chair with a small table beside it. A bell hung on a rope next to the chair, presumably to be used to call a servant. The walls of the office were a busy mosaic of gaily-painted geometric figures of various sizes. It was too loud for Lord Marak’s tastes.

“Thank you,” Lord Marak said as he rubbed his wrists.

The marshal did not reply as he returned to the window and gazed out. Lord Marak wondered what was so interesting beyond the window that the marshal spent so much time gazing out of it. Emperor Bagora walked to the corner of the room near his desk and bent down. When he rose, Lord Marak saw that he was holding the Sword of Torak in his hands.

“This is a very interesting weapon,” remarked the Emperor. “Where did you get it?”

“It was a gift,” Lord Marak replied. “It has since become the symbol of the Torak clan.”

“A very precious gift, no doubt,” the Emperor said as he approached Lord Marak with the sword. “I would not want to see you

leave without it."

The Emperor handed the sword to Lord Marak and immediately turned and walked five paces towards his desk and stopped. Lord Marak's brow creased in confusion as he surveyed the situation. The marshal had his back turned as he gazed out the window. The Emperor had just handed an accused assassin a sword and turned his back to him. Something did not smell right.

"Marshal Chack," Lord Marak said loudly, "I wish to leave my sword in your safekeeping. I know the rules regarding weapons in the Imperial Palace, and I agree with them. Please hold this for me until I leave the palace."

Marshal Chack turned from the window with a grin on his face. He walked across the floor and took the offered sword from Lord Marak's hands. The Emperor returned to his place behind the desk.

"At least you are no fool, Lord Marak," smiled the Emperor as he waved his hand in the air.

Lord Marak thought he heard several slight clicks echo through the room, but he was not sure. His eyes roved over the wall design and finally he saw what he was looking for. Cleverly placed in the busy wall design were small shooting holes. There were dozens of them. If he had chosen to use the sword when the opportunity was presented, Lord Marak would have been struck by dozens of arrows before he could harm the Emperor.

"A fool is something that I have never desired to be," smiled Lord Marak as he walked towards Marshal Chack.

He stopped near the marshal and nodded to the table with the rest of Marak's weapons on it.

"May I make a demonstration with one of those stars?" he asked.

A worried frown fell over the marshal's face as his eyes sought the Emperor. The Emperor nodded and the marshal sighed nervously.

"What do you intend, Lord Marak?" he asked.

"Just a small demonstration to remove all doubt that I could have possibly been trying to kill the Emperor and accidentally missed," declared Lord Marak.

"That is hardly necessary," the marshal shook his head.

"I think it is," Lord Marak persisted. "You are of the mind to believe me at the moment, but I sense a small lingering doubt within you. Do you see that bell hanging near the reading chair?"

"Lord Marak," scowled the marshal, "I tend to believe your story because it is believable. Do not do something so foolish that you make me question my determinations. There is no way that you can hit that bell, and when you miss you will have lost the assurance that you so greatly desired."

Lord Marak fixed his gaze on the marshal as he picked up the

star. He turned and smoothly released the star in a high arc. It appeared at first that Lord Marak's star would strike the ceiling, but gravity pulled it downward. As the star struck the bell, it clanged loudly. The door at the far end of the room immediately opened and an Imperial soldier came through it.

"Is there something you desire, Emperor?" he asked.

"Yes," laughed the Emperor. "Bring us some tea."

"How could you possibly know that you would hit that bell?" asked the marshal.

"As I said early, Marshal," smiled Lord Marak, "I am a warrior. I spend part of each day practicing my chosen profession. I think you will agree that I could not have missed the Emperor from the distance I was away from him."

"I do agree," nodded the marshal as he gently pushed Lord Marak towards the Emperor's desk. "Sit, Lord Marak."

Lord Marak sat and the marshal sat next to him. The Emperor smiled and sat down behind the desk.

"Now that we know who did not try to kill me," the Emperor began, "how do we find out exactly who the assassin is?"

"We should look for someone who considers both you and Lord Marak enemies," declared Marshal Chack.

"It would appear that Lord Marak has many potential enemies," frowned the Emperor. "As for me, killing me makes no sense unless one hopes to replace me as Emperor, and that could only be a member of the Lords' Council. Do you know of any enemies that you might have on the Lords' Council, Lord Marak?"

Lord Marak frowned at the question. He hesitated a long moment before speaking and he could feel the tension rising in the marshal next to him.

"I have recently learned of an enemy who is a member of the Lords' Council," Lord Marak nodded, "but I am hesitant to reveal his name."

"Hesitant to reveal his name?" the marshal echoed loudly. "I do not believe what I am hearing. You were almost executed because of this attempt on the Emperor, and now you withhold information that I might use to arrest the real culprit? I insist on knowing your enemy's name."

"I do not know for a fact that my enemy is the same person who tried to frame me," Lord Marak responded calmly. "Let me explain."

"Go ahead, Lord Marak," the Emperor calmly urged.

"Someone has been ambushing my caravans," Lord Marak began. "They did not seek to steal my goods, but to destroy the caravans and remove all traces of the attack. Three caravans were attacked and destroyed. The first two attacks left no trace whatsoever, but the third

attack had a survivor. This man told of gray warriors attacking near the Three Sisters. He also said that he believed the gray warriors to actually be clansmen in disguise. To learn who my enemy was, I set out to ambush the ambushers."

"Did you succeed?" asked the Emperor.

"Indeed we did," nodded Lord Marak. "We defeated the enemy and took two prisoners. It was through these prisoners that we learned the identity of my enemy. We also learned that he sits on the Lords' Council."

"Can you prove any of this?" asked Marshal Chack. "I mean the words of your men would normally be sufficient, but you will be accusing a member of the Lords' Council. I doubt they would accept the words of your men."

"Highly doubtful," agreed the Emperor. "A member of the Lords' Council is supposed to be the most honest and loyal of Khadorans. Do not even pursue this on the words of your men, Lord Marak."

"Under the law," Lord Marak asserted, "I have the right to restitution. While I am quite aware of the odds against me in a hearing before the Lords' Council, there are other avenues of restitution that I may explore."

"Other avenues?" the marshal shook his head. "What are you going to do, Lord Marak? Are you going to take your Torak armies and knock on the door of a lord with armies that outnumber you twenty to one?"

"If that is what I must do," shrugged Lord Marak, "then that is what I will do. I told you before that I prefer negotiations rather than a fight, but I will fight when I am attacked."

"If this story is true," interrupted the Emperor, "it was a bold and despicable act that was perpetrated against you, but you have no proof. Let it go, Lord Marak."

"I cannot," Lord Marak said stubbornly. "Besides, I have an irrefutable witness."

"No witness is irrefutable," stated Marshal Chack. "If you attack a member of the Lords' Council, the Torak clan will cease to exist."

"Who is this irrefutable witness?" inquired the Emperor. "I demand to know."

When Lord Marak refused to answer, the Emperor's voice softened. "Lord Marak, it is important that we have answers to these questions. I am sure that you can see that. Let's see if we can work together on this. I will promise that the information that you give us will not be used in any way to prevent you from seeking your retribution. In fact, if you prove to my satisfaction your claim of grievance, I may even consider aiding you. The acts against you were most grievous and have no place in Khadoran culture."

Lord Marak thought briefly on the offer before nodding. “My enemy is Lord Patel of the Nordon clan,” he stated. “My impeccable witness is the Lords’ Council mediator known as Katzu.”

The Emperor rose and started pacing behind his desk, his face a mask of rage. The room was deathly quiet except for the footsteps of the Emperor as neither Lord Marak, nor Marshal Chack spoke. Suddenly, the Emperor halted and stared at the marshal.

“Chack,” the Emperor commanded, “find Katzu and have him sent up here. Cancel this afternoon’s assembly meeting and post a notice regarding Lord Woton’s death. The Assembly of Lords shall have to elect a new member to the Lords’ Council tomorrow. And find that red-haired guard and make him talk.”

Chapter 14

Tales of the Past

Marshal Chack entered the office of the Emperor. He walked sullenly across the room and stood near the Emperor's desk.

"We found the soldier," he reported. "His throat was slit and the body was dumped into an empty cell. It was discovered by the workmen trying to assess the damage to the cell area."

"A dead-end then," frowned the Emperor. "What of Katzu? Has he returned to the palace yet?"

"He has," reported the marshal. "He returned last night. I sent a runner to his quarters, and he should be here soon."

As if on cue, a knock on the door echoed through the room. The marshal called for the person to enter and the door opened. Katzu stepped into the room and immediately surveyed the inhabitants. His face showed no emotion as he walked across the floor and stood facing the Emperor.

"Greetings, Katzu," said the Emperor. "I am sure that you are familiar with Lord Marak?"

"I am," Katzu said as he nodded to the Torak lord.

"I understand that you witnessed a certain occurrence near the Three Sisters," stated the Emperor. "Please give me your report."

A slight frown fell over Katzu's normally emotionless face. He stole a glance at Lord Marak and saw the Torak lord nod his approval.

"A Torak caravan was ambushed," reported Katzu. "The ambushers wore the clothing of gray warriors, but one of the Torak officers stated that one of the two prisoners had revealed that they were actually clansmen sworn to Lord Patel."

"So your knowledge of the event is based upon the word of a Torak soldier?" asked Marshal Chack.

"Not at all," Katzu shook his head. "I give little credence to a biased report. I demanded to interrogate the prisoner who had not been spoken to yet. I explained to him who I was before I questioned him. While he was reluctant to reveal the information, he did confirm that the ambushers were Nordon clansmen working under the direct orders of Lord Marshal Orik. He also stated the Lord Patel had direct knowledge of their orders and had been present when they were given their orders. He also described the location of their hidden uniforms."

"And why did you not report this immediately to the Lords' Council?" asked the Emperor.

“I gave my word that I would not until I had allowed Lord Marak to know of it first,” explained the mediator. “It was a most unusual request for silence, but the offense was grievous. If my knowledge became public, I felt the chance for bloodshed would be unavoidable. I had hoped to have a discussion with Lord Marak when I met him here at the Assembly of Lords. It is why I hurried back to Khadoratung.”

“An acceptable answer, Katzu,” nodded the Emperor. “Your logic is, as always, impeccable. You now have that chance to talk Lord Marak out of doing something foolish.”

“Before you speak, Katzu,” interrupted Lord Marak, “I would like to ask that you continue to keep this information secret until I release you from that vow.”

“But I have already reported to the Emperor,” protested Katzu.

“The Emperor had promised me that what is said here will not be used in a manner that would preclude my right of retribution,” insisted Lord Marak.

“Lord Marak is correct,” sighed the Emperor. “I did make that promise in an attempt to locate my assassin.”

“I will obey the spirit as well the actual promise of my Emperor,” declared Katzu, “but I still feel free to offer my advice. Lord Marak, to go against a sitting member of the Lords’ Council is suicide. I know in your short rise to power in the frontier, that you have had stunning successes. I have endeavored to find out the secret arrangements that you have made to avoid bloodshed and have not been able to. Still, going up against Lord Patel will be nothing like battling Lord Ridak. I implore you to assess the risks carefully. Your leadership has worked wonders in the frontier. I do not wish to see you eliminated so early in your life.”

The Emperor’s eyebrows rose as he listened to the mediator’s words. It was the first hint that someone truly appreciated what Lord Marak was doing, and Katzu was not just anybody to the Emperor. He was one of the few people that the Emperor confided in.

“I assure you, Katzu,” smiled Lord Marak, “that I do not intend to amass my armies and strike at Lord Patel’s army. I will seek my retribution in a bloodless way if possible, but I will not let his actions go unpunished.”

“May I ask what it is that you plan to do?” inquired Marshal Chack.

“I am not sure at this moment,” answered Lord Marak. “My goal is not to hurt the Nordon clan, if that is of any help. Lord Patel has been dishonest and underhanded. I plan to force him to abandon such ways in the future. What I can assure you is that I will do nothing before the end of the Assembly of Lords. I will not interfere in the

running of this country."

"That is sufficient to satisfy me," declared the Emperor. "Katzu, thank you not only for coming so quickly, but for what you do for your country. Marshal Chack, you have your work cut out for you. Seek out our assassin. Do not concentrate so hard on Lord Patel that you ignore other possibilities. While there is no doubt that he is Lord Marak's enemy, he is not the only one. Personally, I do not see Lord Patel as a suspect for assassination. It is not his style."

The marshal and Katzu turned to leave the room. Lord Marak rose uncertainly and looked from the marshal to the Emperor. While no longer a suspect, he had not been given leave to depart.

"Stay, Lord Marak," invited the Emperor. "As long as you are here, there are some other matters that I would like to discuss with you."

Lord Marak nodded and sat back down.

"You intrigue me, Lord Marak," opened the Emperor. "The rumors about you are among the most mysterious in the nation, yet you are but a minor frontier lord. Some say you rose to power by tricking Lord Ridak. Others say that you were favored as a son of Lord Ridak and betrayed him. Which should I believe?"

"None of them," Lord Marak smiled. "Lord Ridak was a devious man. He sought to use me as a scapegoat for his failures. Fardale was a failing estate and its contracts were going to be defaulted. He set me up as Lord of Fardale so that he would have someone to blame for the failure. The only problem with his plan is that I did not fail. I succeeded, and he hated me for it."

"That sounds typical," frowned the Emperor. "I know of the Lords' Council settlement that declared the Torak clan, but I understand that you were involved in a previous one. I believe it involved a dispute with the Sorgan and Litari clans. There was a settlement before the mediator arrived. Would you care to explain what happened?"

"With no disrespect intended, Emperor," frowned Lord Marak, "I would prefer not to discuss that settlement."

"It was embarrassing for you?" questioned the Emperor. "Young lords often make mistakes, Marak. It is nothing to be ashamed of."

"While I do not claim any semblance of perfection," clarified the Torak lord, "I am not embarrassed by the settlement. It was a good settlement for all concerned."

"Now you have me more curious than ever," chuckled the Emperor. "Why do I get the feeling that you came out the best in the negotiations?"

"That I cannot say," smiled Lord Marak.

"Let me tell you something that I regard as a personal secret, Lord

Marak," the Emperor said conspiratorially. "As noble as many think the lords of Khadora are, there are only two men in this country that I truly trust. The Imperial Marshal Chack is one of them. The mediator, Katzu, is the other. Today I saw something in Katzu's eyes that I have not seen in some time. He admires you, Lord Marak. That makes me want to know everything there is to know about you."

"I feel honored," Lord Marak stated. "Katzu has been efficiently honest in all dealings that I know of. He strikes me as the ideal Khadoran."

"I would wager that he feels the same about you," replied the Emperor. "I also believe he is wily enough to have learned most of your secrets, but do not worry. He would not even tell me if he had."

"I am afraid that secrets are required at the moment," sighed Lord Marak. "As you well know, I have more enemies than friends."

"A most truthful statement," nodded the Emperor. "That makes me ask why you do what you do. You are a lord at a very young age. You live in the frontier where few lords will bother you. Yet you campaign for the freedom of slaves. Why do you bother? You could have a relatively good life, instead of having all of the lords in Khadora wishing you dead. Why do you do it?"

"It is necessary," shrugged Lord Marak. "I have heard that you are a student of history, Emperor. Tell me of the beginning of Khadora."

The Emperor looked strangely at the young lord, but he said, "Khadoratung is the beginning of Khadora. Here is where the country started. Our founder Khador stood upon a hill overlooking the Imperial Valley and declared that it was where we would live."

"What about before the founding of Khadoratung?" questioned Lord Marak.

"There are few records that predate Khadoratung," declared the Emperor. "Why would they matter in any event?"

"Because Khadora is the last refuge of a fleeing army," declared Lord Marak. "The indigenous peoples called the Khadorans invaders. Their histories tell of the massive armies that arrived in great ships. The scrolls tell how the invaders burned their ships so that they could never return to where they came from. They mention how the invaders set out to annihilate the indigenous peoples, not only here in Khadora, but in Omunga and Fakara as well."

"How do you know what the Chula believe?" the Emperor asked skeptically.

"I have asked them," Lord Marak stated. "I have spoken with the Chula, the Sakovans, and the Qubari. Their stories are remarkably similar. What does that mean to an historian?"

"You have actually spoken to these savages and lived to tell about it?" asked the Emperor with disbelief in his voice.

“The Chula do not seek to kill Khadorans,” Lord Marak said. “There are continual battles only because the Khadorans are still trying to annihilate the Chula. Ask yourself when was the last time that the Chula invaded any lord’s holdings.”

“They never do,” remarked the Emperor. “They know they would be destroyed.”

“Would they?” asked Lord Marak. “I consider myself a well-trained warrior. I must admit to you that I would be fearful of going up against the Chula. I would rather fight every lord in Khadora first.”

“What are you saying?” questioned the Emperor. “Do you really think they are that strong? Is there a threat to Khadora from these savages?”

“No threat at all,” declared Lord Marak. “If we do not try to destroy the Chula, they will cause us no harm. They want to be peaceful.”

‘Is that how you solved your problems in Fardale?” asked the Emperor. “You befriended the Chula?”

“That was one of the solutions,” nodded Lord Marak. “I was asked about my sword earlier, and I said it was a gift. I spoke the truth. The fact is that the sword was a gift from the Chula. They place a high value on a friendly neighbor. A higher value than most Khadoran lords do.”

“I am amazed,” admitted the Emperor. “Will they keep their word?”

“I trust their word with my life,” declared Lord Marak. “I have found them to be the most honest of all people.”

“Then why have we fought with them since the founding of Khadora?” asked the Emperor. “How could they have changed so much?”

“They have not changed at all,” Lord Marak insisted. “We never fought them because we could not trust them. We killed them because we could not trust ourselves.”

“What you say makes no sense,” Emperor Bagora shook his head. “Explain your last statement.”

“The invaders came to this land to flee from some great evil,” explained Lord Marak. “The evil was so great that the invaders burned their ships and magically seared their minds to forget what they fled. It was said that the memories of the great evil would only return if the invaders married the indigenous peoples in whose minds the memories were not blocked.”

“Why did they care if they remembered the great evil?” inquired the Emperor. “It would seem to me that to remember would be best.”

“Because remembering the evil would be to call it to their new land,” Lord Marak said. “That is why they seared their minds.”

“I remember reading an old journal of the founders of Khadora,” the Emperor said excitedly. “It made absolutely no sense to me, but I remember it used those very words. It spoke of a magical searing of the minds. This is most interesting to me. Can you share these old scrolls with me? I would love to read them.”

“I have one with me from the temple of the Qubari,” offered Lord Marak. “It is in my pack in my quarters.”

The Emperor rang a bell and an Imperial guard immediately entered. He instructed the guard to retrieve Lord Marak’s pack.

“So the Qubari still exist?” asked the Emperor. “Or did you find ruins of their lost civilization?”

“They still exist,” answered Lord Marak.

“This is very exciting for me,” frowned the Emperor, “but we are getting off the subject. I was asking why you continue to push this idea of freedom for the slaves.”

“The topics are related,” explained Lord Marak. “There is an ancient prophecy that states that one day the invaders will indeed intermarry with the indigenous peoples. When that happens, the great evil will be called to this land. It will be known as the Time of Calling.”

“All the more reason to extinguish the indigenous peoples, Lord Marak,” sighed the Emperor. “First you build a case for extending the hand of friendship to the Chula, and then you show why we cannot. I am confused.”

“I assume that you have heard of Grulak?” asked Lord Marak.

“Oh yes,” nodded the Emperor. “The savage from Fakara. I heard that he recently died.”

“He did,” confirmed Lord Marak, “but his death means nothing. It is his birth that is momentous. You see, Emperor, Grulak was a half-breed. His mother was Qubari, and Grulak’s birth began the Time of Calling.”

“Began the Time of Calling?” echoed the Emperor. “Are you saying that the great evil of long ago is supposedly going to come here to haunt us?”

“Not to haunt us,” corrected Lord Marak. “It is coming to destroy us.”

“You actually believe this, don’t you?” challenged the Emperor.

“I do,” nodded Lord Marak. “That is why I cannot sit on my estate and be happy to be a Khadoran lord. This country must be united. We must be strong and plan a defense against what is about to come. We must learn to stop squabbling among ourselves over matters that are really unimportant.”

“All of your actions now become clear to me, Lord Marak,” The Emperor said. “The problem is, I think your thoughts are based on

some old tale meant to scare children. We cannot run this country on such wild assumptions."

"Can't we?" countered Lord Marak. "Suppose we do make all the moves necessary to prepare for the coming invasion, and it never materializes? What is the loss to Khadoran society? Would our loss be that we can now live in harmony with one another? Or that we no longer require slaves to have a prosperous economy? Would it be that the armies of different clans can work and train together? What exactly is the downside of preparing the country for this supposed invasion?"

"Well," chuckled the Emperor, "for one, the people will think their leaders are crazy. Who could have faith in a leader who doesn't have the intelligence to see through a children's tale?"

"The people do not need to know why we are preparing," offered Lord Marak. "There is no reason to announce the coming evil. In fact, it might be counterproductive. We want people to learn to work together. No reason need be given."

The Emperor nodded as he dwelt on Lord Marak's words. A knock on the door interrupted the silence and Lord Marak's pack was delivered. Marak gently removed the old Qubari scroll from his pack and handed it to the Emperor. The Emperor read silently for a long time before he carefully placed the scroll on the desk.

"That is a scary document," the Emperor stated. "It does confirm what you have said, but it could easily be the fertile imagination of a scribe who died a long time ago."

"I am not sure that I can ever prove my theories to you," sighed Lord Marak. "Even if I took you to the temple in Angragar, it would probably not convince you, but one thing will confirm what I have said. That confirmation will come when Khadora is overwhelmed with the armies of the great evil."

"You know where Angragar is?" asked the Emperor. "Your stories get more outlandish by the moment."

"I not only know where it is," stated Lord Marak. "I have been there. I have read the scrolls that predate our ancestors' arrival on these shores by a thousand years. These scrolls predicted the coming of the Khadorans. If that is what I must do to get you to believe the danger that we are in, I will arrange to take you to Angragar."

"You are quite serious," the Emperor said as his eyebrows rose. "You are either telling the truth, or you have gone quite mad."

"I am not mad," assured Lord Marak. "The ancient city of Angragar is guarded by spirit beings called hellsouls. The gates were magically sealed thousands of years ago, and nobody has been able to enter it, until now. As prophesied by the ancient Qubari, a man will be born in the Time of Calling. That man will be known as the Astor, and

he will be able to open the gates of Angragar. I personally know this Astor. He allowed me to accompany him into the city of Angragar."

"Another story?" quipped the Emperor. "How can you verify this?"

"There is a woman in Khadoratung right now that accompanied the Astor into Angragar," declared Lord Marak. "It was not on the same trip as the one I took, but if you ask me to describe something in the city and then ask her the same question, would agreeable answers confirm that we have both been there?"

"It would," nodded the Emperor, "but what can I possibly ask?"

"Without revealing the location of Angragar, which I have vowed not to," suggested Lord Marak, "I will describe my journey through the city. Try to picture it and then form a question about one of the buildings."

"Who is this woman and where can she be found?" asked the Emperor.

"Ask one of my soldiers to go get the Fakaran," answered Lord Marak. "They will bring her back if you will offer assurances that no harm will come to her."

The Emperor rang the bell and gave instructions to a soldier. He then asked Lord Marak to describe his journey. For half an hour, the Emperor listened intently to the tale of Lord Marak's journey into the city that the world forgot.

"An excellent tale," smiled the Emperor. "Ah, to be free of this office for a journey such as that. All right, Lord Marak, here is my request. I want you to draw me a map of that central square. Label the palace and the temple and indicate the street you came into the square from."

Lord Marak drew what was requested and slid the drawing to the Emperor. "I cannot guarantee that she arrived using the same street," Lord Marak said, "but she will certainly have entered the square from the same direction."

"That will be good enough for me," declared the Emperor as a knock sounded on the door.

The door swung open, and Gunta and Mistake were allowed to enter. Two Imperial soldiers also entered. The Emperor dismissed the two soldiers. Gunta looked around the room warily, and Mistake appeared ready to bolt at a moment's notice. Lord Marak stood and beckoned them both to the desk.

"I apologize," frowned the Emperor. "It did not occur to me until just now that your people might think that you are still in danger. I commend them on following your orders without question for their own safety."

"Gunta, Mistake," smiled Lord Marak, "I would like you to meet

Emperor Bagora."

Gunta promptly bowed, but Mistake appeared confused.

"You are not imprisoned any more?" asked Mistake.

"He certainly is not," smiled the Emperor. "I asked him to summon you so that he might prove a point to me. Shouldn't Gunta return to his quarters?" the Emperor quietly asked Lord Marak.

"There is no need for that," answered Lord Marak as he realized that the Emperor was concerned about revealing the existence of Angragar to a mere soldier. "Gunta goes everywhere with me. He has been there, too."

"Very well," nodded the Emperor. "If you will take Gunta with you and walk to the far end of the room, I will spend some time alone with this young Fakaran."

Lord Marak and Gunta walked the length of the room to where the reading chair was, while Mistake sat at the desk across from the Emperor.

"What happened?" Gunta asked. "The last we heard you were imprisoned."

"I believe it was the mage called Aakuta," whispered Lord Marak. "He blasted a whole clear through the wall of the prison. They had no place to keep me so the marshal brought me to the Emperor. I think he expected a quick decision of execution, but that is not how things went."

"Obviously," replied Gunta. "Are you still in trouble?"

"Not at all," smiled Lord Marak. "Bringing me here gave me the chance to explain my side of things. It took a while, but the Emperor and the marshal now know that I was not the assassin. I like Bagora. He is an honest and decent man. I wish all of the lords were like him."

"I was not sure the message to get Mistake was really from you," stated Gunta. "We were ready for trouble when we entered here. You cannot imagine the relief I feel knowing that you are safe."

"I do think Kaltara is watching over me," smiled Lord Marak.

"The Chula god?" questioned Gunta.

"Our god," corrected Lord Marak. "He is known to the Chula, the Sakovans, and the Qubari. I do not think those three peoples can be wrong in their beliefs. Have you had any luck in locating the real assassin?"

"None," frowned Gunta. "Torak soldiers are watched wherever we go. None of the other clans will even talk to us. If we walk into a room, everyone else walks out. It is as if we are contagious."

"So everybody still assumes that I was the assassin?" inquired the Torak lord.

"There has been no announcement to the contrary," shrugged Gunta. "Perhaps you could talk the Emperor into setting the record

straight."

Lord Marak heard laughing from the other end of the room. He looked up and saw the Emperor waving for him to return. He touched Gunta on the elbow and returned to the Emperor's desk.

"Her drawing is much better than yours, Lord Marak," chuckled the Emperor.

"Angragar?" gasped Gunta. "Why are you drawing that?"

"You have proved your words, Lord Marak," declared the Emperor. "I want to have more talks with you on this subject and others, but today is not the time for it. Have you considered buying a house here in Khadoratung?"

"I have never given it thought," confessed the Torak lord.

"Do so," suggested the Emperor. "If you want to change this country, you must be accessible to the Imperial Valley. In the meantime, your quarters here in the Imperial Palace will be available to you. I will see that the Torak clan is moved to better quarters after the assembly is over. You should not travel with just a squad for protection."

"I appreciate that, Emperor Bagora," smiled Lord Marak. "If there is nothing else at this time, I would like to let my people know that I am safe."

"Of course, of course," nodded the Emperor. "I should have done so long ago."

"I have one more question," chirped Mistake. "Do you know an Omungan general named Didyk?"

"Omungan?" frowned the Emperor. "I have heard his name mentioned in reports, but I have never met him. I could not imagine an Omungan general coming here, and I have never been south of the Kalatung Mountains. Why do you ask?"

"I heard he was in Khadoratung," answered Mistake. "I thought maybe he was visiting you."

"He is not," declared the Emperor as he rang the bell.

The door opened and a soldier entered the room. He held the door for the leaving guests. As Lord Marak left the room, he heard the Emperor asking for his legal scholar.

Chapter 15

Changing the Rules

A loud knock on the door of the Torak quarters in the Imperial Palace echoed through the small suite. Botal opened the door to see Marshal Chack and several Imperial soldiers laden with weapons.

"We are delivering your weapons," the marshal declared. "The tainted star will not be returned."

Botal opened the door wider to let the soldiers in. They deposited the weapons on the table and left. Marshal Chack lingered and Lord Marak walked up to him.

"I apologize for my earlier actions, Lord Marak," stated the marshal.

"No apology is necessary, Marshal," replied Lord Marak. "You were performing your duties as you thought best."

"While that is true," Chack frowned, "there has been no announcement of your guilt or innocence, nor will there be. We never make such statements. I am afraid that most of the other lords will still act as if you are the assassin."

"Can't you make a statement so that Lord Marak is not ostracized?" asked Botal.

"No," the marshal shook his head. "Until we find the assassin, we will not rule anyone out. I am convinced that you are not the assassin that we seek, Lord Marak, but if I made a statement that you were not a suspect, every other lord would demand a similar statement. It is just something that I cannot do."

"I understand, Marshal Chack," smiled Lord Marak. "I will learn to deal with the suspicions of the other lords. Thank you for taking the time to explain it to me."

The marshal smiled weakly and nodded before leaving the suite.

"That is not right," protested Mistake. "Word sure spread rapidly enough when you were thrown into the cell."

"I will deal with it," Lord Marak snapped before sighing and shaking his head with regret. "We must not be at each other's throats over this matter. While there will be no formal statement from the marshal, I will still be walking around freely. No objective person would believe that the marshal is letting an assassin walk freely."

"But they will still treat you as a pariah," Gunta pointed out.

"They did before this incident," shrugged Lord Marak. "Nothing has changed. Do you need an escort to leave the palace, Mistake?"

“No,” beamed the small thief as she pointed to a white pin on her clothes that identified her as an Imperial guest. “The marshal gave me this pin to wear. I can go anywhere I want in the palace now.”

“They will take that from you when you leave,” declared Gunta. “It was only meant to allow you to visit the Emperor.”

“No!” scowled Mistake. “It is my treasure.”

“But it would allow you to reenter the palace,” shrugged Latril. “You will have to give it up.”

“Never,” Mistake said adamantly.

Lord Marak opened his pack and extracted a Torak pin that identified the wearer as a staff member of the Torak clan. He handed the pin to Mistake.

“Wear the Torak pin when you leave,” he instructed, “and use the Imperial pin when you enter. Never use the same door for both entry and exit.”

“Thank you,” beamed Mistake as she switched pins. “I will return to the inn and see what the people outside the palace are saying. I want to tell StarWind that the Emperor is unaware of the Omungan general being in Khadora.”

Marak smiled broadly as the diminutive Fakaran slipped out the door. “Latril,” he said turning to his mage, “let’s see how icy the reception is in the dining room. Botal, I want a man in this room at all times.”

The Torak squad leader nodded as Lord Marak and Latril exited the room. The Torak lord led the way to the dining room. Lord Marak felt as if he was being watched. With what appeared to be a casual look at Latril, he noticed an Imperial soldier following him. He looked again as he ushered Latril into the dining room, and the soldier was caught unprepared. The soldier dropped his eyes to the floor and continued walking past the dining room.

When Lord Marak and Latril entered the dining room, the conversation immediately died. Everyone turned and glared at Lord Marak. The young lord sighed deeply and escorted Latril to the only empty table, one designed to seat six. After they sat down, light murmurs of conversation started up again. Lord Marak did not need an air tunnel to know that everyone was discussing him. The ugly glares spoke volumes about how Lord Marak was to be treated. As he looked about the room, he saw the Imperial soldier, who had been following him, slip into the dining room and stand with his back to the wall.

In the far corner of the room, Lord Sevrin sat with several lords from the upper reaches of the Macara River. The Ragatha lord sighed with frustration as he listened to the vile comments his companions were making about Lord Marak. Finally, he stood up.

“You act as if Lord Marak is the most vile enemy in all of Khadora,” Lord Sevrin said loudly to the men at his table.

Everyone in the room turned to listen and see what was happening.

“I have news for you high and mighty lords,” steamed Lord Sevrin. “Lord Marak took one of my estates because the man that I chose as lord of that estate was a fool. He attacked Lord Marak without provocation and paid with his life. You might think that such a situation gives me the right to hate the Torak lord, and maybe it does, but I do not. Lord Marak was in the right, and I conceded Woodville to him. As I came to know Lord Marak, I found a Khadoran lord that puts the rest of you to shame. He is a man of impeccable honor and a compassionate conqueror. It is obvious from his state of freedom that he is not responsible for the death of Lord Woton, and yet you all act as if he is. When the rest of you are ready to measure up to the high standards that Lord Marak has set for honor among lords, I will once again sit at your table.”

Lord Sevrin turned and marched to Lord Marak’s table and sat down. A hundred conversations immediate split the air of the room. Lord Sevrin had been a member of the Assembly of Lords for over twenty years, and he was known personally by most of the lords in the room. Before the conversation had a chance to die down, Lord Rybak rose from his seat in the center of the room.

“I must say that I agree with Lord Sevrin,” announced Lord Rybak. “As a Situ, my clan has also been bested by Lord Marak in battle. While I am new here in the Assembly of Lords, I cannot remain silent while many of you disparage his name. I will just leave you with a question and an offer. Ask yourselves why a clan that had been defeated by Lord Marak would speak so highly of him. Answer that question, and you will be vying to sit at his table. As to the offer, I will follow Lord Marak’s offer of a discount to clans that relinquish slavery as the Situ clan has.”

Lord Rybak walked to Lord Marak’s table and sat down. The noise level in the room grew so high that it was impossible for some to listen to the people at their own tables. Lord Shamino and Lord Burdine rose and also relocated to Lord Marak’s table. Lord Marak looked at his lords and shook his head as he smiled.

“You have cast your lot quite early in this war,” Lord Marak stated. “I wonder if it would not have been better for them to think of us as adversaries for a while longer?”

“You do not have a while to think about it, Lord Marak,” answered Lord Burdine. “You were an outcast coming into this room. If we did not act now, your reforms would be dead. By us showing our support for you now, the other clans must come to grips with the fact

that you are not an outcast. You are no longer imprisoned, and all of your neighbors are willing to make a defiant stand in your favor. That will cause all of the other lords to reconsider their attitudes towards you, even the ones who are your enemies."

"He is right," nodded Lord Sevrin. "We would gain nothing by remaining silent because if this shunning was allowed to stand, you would never be able to propose anything that we could get behind you on. You would never be allowed to speak. Now is the time for us to state our allegiance. It is a rare sight in Khadora to see all of a lord's neighbors openly defy common sentiment and take a stand in favor of that lord."

"I thank all of you for doing so," smiled Lord Marak as he noticed the same Imperial soldier suddenly leave the dining room. "Nothing in your Vows of Service required this gesture."

"You mean more to us than our Vows of Service," declared Lord Rybak. "That is not the reason we spoke. We believe in what you are trying to do for Khadora. The others will eventually understand."

"Even if you have to defeat them one by one," grinned Lord Burdine.

The dining room eventually quieted down and returned to normal. While none of the other lords approached Lord Marak and spoke to him, several did nod to the Torak Lord as they left the room. After everyone had left, Lord Marak and Latril returned to the Torak quarters.

* * *

Lord Marak had wanted to go to the garden and make contact with Fardale before the morning session of the Assembly of Lords, but a storm had blown in overnight and the weather outside was foul. He paced the room with the nervousness of a caged animal. His mind processed thoughts in an erratic fashion, but one concern kept on reoccurring. He wondered about the Imperial soldier that was ordered to spy on him. He knew that either the Emperor or the marshal had ordered the man to spy on him, but he could not determine why. Did either of them continue to consider Marak as a suspect in the assassination? If the soldier was meant merely as a safety precaution, then why did he leave the dining room to report what had transpired there?

"Stop the pacing," chided Halman. "You will wear a hole in the floor."

"Would that be so bad?" quipped Lord Marak. "Were it a big enough hole, I could crawl into it, and everyone would be pleased."

"What will happen," retorted Gunta, "will happen. Remember what you spoke of in the Emperor's office? Perhaps you should let your mind dwell on those types of questions rather than how much

the other lords like you."

"Do you mean about Kaltara?" questioned the Torak lord.

"I do," nodded Gunta. "You thought he would guide you. Have you changed your mind?"

Lord Marak frowned with a puzzled look on his face as he stared at Gunta. Slowly, he nodded and walked into the small office. He closed the door and sat at the desk. Marak tried to clear his mind of all the troubling questions that were plaguing him. He tried to remember the tales that Lyra had told him of her god, Kaltara, and how he guided her. He recalled the trip to Angragar with Rejji and the Qubari tales of how only the Astor could open the gates that had been sealed by Kaltara. Lastly, he thought about the Chula and his father, Ukaro. The shaman had reinforced the others' beliefs about Kaltara and stressed that the Torak could always call upon the god to intervene in a crisis.

For the first time in his life, Marak prayed. He asked Kaltara for guidance in uniting the Khadoran people and ridding them of slavery. He asked for knowledge to understand the evil that would try to annihilate his people. Lastly, he asked for strength to endure the barbs of the other lords, at least long enough to bring them together. Lord Marak received no answers from Kaltara, but his mind felt strangely calm when he had finished.

Full of a newfound determination to confront the other lords head-on with his proposed reforms, Lord Marak stood erect and inhaled deeply as he would just before a great battle. He opened the door to the office and strode out.

"I am off to the Assembly of Lords," he declared. "Continue to seek information on the assassin and the dark mage, Aakuta. I shall return near the midday."

Lord Marak left the quarters and strode along the corridor to the Assembly Chamber. He was the first to arrive, and the sight of the Imperial soldier following him did not dampen his spirit. As the lords started arriving for the meeting, Lord Marak resisted the urge to use an air tunnel to spy on them. He was quite sure that he would only hear vilification of his own character, so he was quite relieved when Lord Shamino arrived and sat in the seat next to him.

"You missed the morning meal," greeted Lord Shamino.

"I did not have the stomach for much more of the shunning," shrugged Lord Marak. "You might say that I feel that my first trip to the Assembly of Lords has gone on long enough."

"Then you must get your attitude under control," urged the Sorgan lord. "Last night you were the topic of gossip. Today is different. This morning everyone was talking about the upcoming vote to replace Lord Woton on the Lords' Council."

“Well,” Lord Marak said, “at least they are onto a more peasant conversation.”

“It might not be so pleasant,” declared Lord Shamino. “The Neju clan is now led by Lord Jamarat. He is not liked by those who know him.”

“Little will that matter,” shrugged Lord Marak. “He is the leader of the Neju clan. He will replace Lord Woton on the Lords’ Council. It has always been so. They say the members of the Lords’ Council are elected by the Assembly of Lords, but what they fail to say is that only one lord is ever nominated. That is not much of an election.”

“Not this time,” Lord Shamino grinned as he delighted in being the bearer of strange news. “The word is that someone will nominate Lord Faliman of the Aritor clan. There are many in the Assembly that viewed Lord Woton merely as one of Lord Mirakotto’s lackeys, and his brother Jamarat is even less liked. This should prove to be a momentous day in Khadoran history.”

“Really?” Lord Marak said as he perked up a bit. “It will be interesting to see who dares to break with convention. Whoever it is might be worth talking to. It is this attitude of having always done something a certain way that closes the minds of these lords to reason. If I can find a few lords who dare to think on their own, perhaps we can start to change things in Khadora.”

“Perhaps,” nodded Lord Shamino as the room began to fill.

Within moments the lords took their seats, and the horns sounded the arrival of the Emperor. Bagora walked to the center of the stage and gazed out at the assembled lords. He waited for the last murmurs of conversation to cease.

“Lords of Khadora,” began the Emperor, “it is with great sadness that I report what you already know. Yesterday, Lord Woton of the Neju clan was struck down by an assassin.”

Shouts of outrage rippled through the room and more than one lord turned to glare at Lord Marak. The Emperor waited patiently.

“Lord Woton will be missed,” continued Emperor Bagora, “as any member of the Lords’ Council would be. Marshal Chack assures me that the assassin who perpetrated this foul deed will be caught. We cannot, however, stop the business of government while the hunt continues. I have therefore instructed the Lords’ Council to use this morning’s meeting of the Assembly of Lords to fulfill their duty of electing a new member to the Lords’ Council. Without further rambling, I will turn this meeting over to Lord Garic, member of the Lords’ Council, and leader of the Ronan clan. Lord Garic.”

The Emperor turned and walked to his throne at the rear of the stage. Lord Garic nodded and stepped to the center of the stage.

“I open this meeting of the Assembly of Lords for the purpose of

electing a new member to the Lords' Council," Lord Garic stated formally. "Are there any nominations?"

Lord Mirakotto immediately rose from his front-row seat. "I, Lord Mirakotto of the Argetta clan, wish to make a nomination," he stated.

Lord Garic nodded and Lord Mirakotto climbed onto the stage. He faced the assembled lords and spoke loudly and clearly.

"Lord Woton was a dear friend and colleague of mine," he began. "He will be sorely missed. The Neju clan has had a seat on the Lords' Council for over two hundred years. They have contributed a great many distinguished lords during that period of time, and I know that fine devotion to Khadora will continue under the new leadership of the Neju clan. Lord Woton's brother, Lord Jamarat, is now the recognized leader of the Neju. His placement on the Lords' Council will ensure that the Council continues its course without the interruptions that might be introduced by a new clan. I nominate Lord Jamarat of the Neju clan for a seat on the Lords' Council."

A tremendous roar of approval rippled through the chamber.

"I suspect Lord Mirakotto caught wind of the competition," chuckled Lord Shamino. "That is no doubt why he stressed the continuance of the Council's work."

"You suspect wisely," agreed Lord Marak. "I wonder which lord will stick his neck out to nominate Lord Faliman."

Lord Mirakotto returned to his seat, and another member of the Lords' Council rose.

"I, Lord Kiamesh of the Scratti clan, also wish to make a nomination," declared Lord Kiamesh.

"Another member of the Lords' Council," noted Lord Marak as Lord Kiamesh climbed onto the stage. "He is the leader of the Scratti clan. Do you think this means that there is squabbling among the members of the Lords' Council?"

"It must mean exactly that," nodded Lord Shamino. "I did not think they would ever allow their differences to be shown in public. The rift must be deep indeed."

"I also want to extend my condolences to the Neju clan for their loss," Lord Kiamesh began. "Lord Woton worked very hard on the Lords' Council, and no one can dispute the long years of service that the Neju clan has given their country. Still, I think it is time for a change."

Quite a few shouts of agreement ripped across the room as Lord Kiamesh's supporters let their strength be known.

Lord Kiamesh grinned broadly at the interruption as he continued, "For many hundreds of years, the same clans have been called upon to serve on the Lords' Council. Always the clans of the Imperial Valley serve, as it should be, but periodically individual clans

come and go within that mix. The Neju clan, as Lord Mirakotto pointed out, has served on the Council for the last two hundred years. There are other noble clans in the Imperial Valley that have served loyally in the past, but have recently been refused a chance. I think two hundred years is long enough."

Again the shouts rippled through the room, and Lord Mirakotto turned and glared at some of the more vocal lords.

"The Aritor clan dates back to the founding," Lord Kiamesh continued. "Members of the Aritor clan have served for many generations on the Lords' Council, but they have not been given the opportunity in several generations. I think this is rather unfair. I nominate Lord Faliman, head of the Aritor clan, for the empty seat on the Lords' Council."

Lord Marak observed the roomful of lords as Lord Kiamesh took his seat.

"Lord Kiamesh has more than a handful of supporters," noted Lord Marak. "I think this Lord Faliman is quite popular."

"Hardly," laughed Lord Shamino. "Most of the people cheering hardly know him. The fact is, almost everyone hates Lord Jamarat. The man is a brutal animal. He beats slaves and animals alike as if it is his daily chore. He has never had a kind word for anyone, and worst of all, not one lord trusts him."

"Except Lord Mirakotto?" interrupted Lord Marak.

"Not even Lord Mirakotto," Lord Shamino shook his head. "The word is that Lord Mirakotto can control him. That is not the same as trusting him."

Lord Garic returned to the center of the stage and cleared his throat loudly to get the attention of the chamber.

"If there are no more nominations," said Lord Garic, "I would like to start the voting process."

A sudden tapping on the floor of the stage caused Lord Garic to turn around. He stared questioningly at the Emperor. Emperor Bagora rose and walked to the center of the stage.

"It is unusual for the Emperor to interrupt a session of the Assembly of Lords," the Emperor began, "but these are unusual times. For the first time in recent memory, we are about to have a vote on nominations to the Lords' Council. As you are all aware, this is a rare day in the history of Khadora. While the Assembly of Lords has been endowed with the privilege of voting for the members of the Lords' Council, it has been a long time since that privilege was actually enjoyed. How does it feel to be actually making a difference in the history of your country?"

The assembled lords roared loudly in a manner befitting young children. The Emperor grinned as he watched the childish behavior.

“Good,” smiled the Emperor. “It is about time that you flexed your muscles.”

Lord Mirakotto rose from his seat, his face red with anger. “For what purpose does the Emperor interrupt the proceedings of this body?” he demanded.

“You rise, Lord Mirakotto,” scowled the Emperor, “to challenge my right to speak, but I do not recall you being recognized to do so.”

Lord Marak watched intently as Lord Mirakotto faced the Emperor. The Argetta lord turned and glared at Lord Garic who was responsible for conducting the session.

“Lord Mirakotto has a valid objection,” declared Lord Garic. “While the Emperor is afforded the opening statement of the Assembly of Lords, we are well past that point. We are in the middle of voting here. By what right does the Emperor speak?”

“I am the Emperor of Khadora,” declared Bagora. “Under the law, I have the right to speak in the Assembly of Lords not only for the purpose of opening comments, but also to nominate, or second the nomination of, a lord to the Lords’ Council. I have already spoken to my legal scholar about this. If you wish to clarify my position, I will gladly wait while you do.”

Lord Kiamesh’s face erupted into a broad grin, but Lord Mirakotto kicked the desk in front of him. Lord Garic looked questioningly at Lord Mirakotto, but eventually he just shrugged.

“I recognize Emperor Bagora for the purpose of making a nomination or seconding one,” stated Lord Garic.

“Thank you,” smiled the Emperor. “Lord Kiamesh made an elegant speech a few moments ago. He pointed out the stagnancy of our Lords’ Council. I not only agree that those lords who represent us on the Lords’ Council should be rotated, but I think we should take things a step further.”

Lord Kiamesh frowned, and Lord Mirakotto sat up in his chair and stared at the Emperor.

“Since our founding,” continued the Emperor, “The Lords’ Council has been composed of the same dozen clans. They are all from the Imperial Valley, and for the most part, they all think alike. While this may be good for stability, it is not a sound scenario if we ever hope to progress into something better than we are today. Many of you have heard some strange and outrageous proposals floating around the palace the last few days. I think listening to strange proposals is something that we do not do often enough. How are we to grow as a nation if we continue to do things as we have done them for the last thousand years?”

Murmurs of agreement came from every direction of the chamber as the Emperor struck a familiar complaint of the lords. Each of them

harbored some resentment to the chosen dozen clans who made all of the rules.

"What I am about to do," continued the Emperor, "has not been done in four hundred years, and even then it was only done half-heartedly. It is time not only for a new clan to step up to the Lords' Council, but it is time for a different region of the country to have a say in our future. Khadora is much more than just the Imperial Valley. It is with a keen eye to the future of our country, that I nominate Lord Marak of the Torak clan to the Lords' Council."

Chapter 16

Lords' Council

After nominating Lord Marak to the Lords' Council, Emperor Bagora returned to his throne as Lord Garic returned to the center of the stage.

"Unless there are more nominations," he said with a long pause as he gazed around the chamber, "We will begin with the voting."

"Keep a list of everyone who votes for Lord Faliman," Lord Marak urged Lord Shamino. "I will track those who vote for Lord Jamarat. This is a great opportunity to record alliances no matter how fragile they may be."

"What about the votes for you?" asked Lord Shamino.

"I think I can handle those in addition to keeping track of Lord Jamarat's," chuckled Lord Marak. "While I am touched by the Emperor's nomination, I seriously doubt that these lords will elect me to anything."

"Do not underestimate the power of the Emperor," countered the Sorgan lord. "The votes are given verbally, and there are few lords who want to be seen as not following the Emperor's lead."

Lord Marak shrugged as the voting began. Lord Garic solicited votes beginning in the front row. This allowed the current members of the Lords' Council to make their votes known to the other lords. It was a minor form of intimidation and the results were quite expectable. All of the members of the Lords' Council voted for either Lord Jamarat or Lord Faliman.

Some of the lords stood and merely stated their vote, but others made speeches as well. A full dozen votes had been given before a lord voted for Lord Marak. The Torak lord's eyebrows rose in surprise. An hour into the voting, Lord Shamino chuckled.

"Do you now doubt the power of the Emperor?" he asked.

"This is most unexpected," admitted Lord Marak. "I have never spoken to most of these lords. In fact, I recognize many voting for me as being among those who glared at me last night in a most hostile fashion."

"To go against the wishes of the Emperor is to spit into the wind," quipped Lord Shamino. "That is why it is so rare for the Emperor to take a position in a matter such as this. Trust me when I say that they are not voting for you because they like you. They are voting to register their support for the Emperor. You will be a member of the

Lords' Council before this session adjourns."

"Then I should begin to think about what I should do once I am there," frowned Lord Marak.

"You will not be allowed to do much at all," sighed Lord Shamino. "This vote will probably cause the Lords' Council to forget their prior disagreements and join forces against you. You are in for a rough ride, Lord Marak. You had best be prepared for it."

The speeches dragged on as lord after lord spoke of the need for fresh blood on the Lords' Council and why they had personally decided to vote for Lord Marak. Long before the voting had reached the back row of the room, it was obvious that Lord Marak had won. The speeches grew shorter as the midday break approached. Finally, Lord Marak stood and voted for himself. Lord Garic immediately announced the results and congratulated Lord Marak from the stage. He then adjourned the meeting for the midday meal. As the lords rose from their seats, an Imperial soldier approached Lord Marak.

"Emperor Bagora would like to see you in his office," the soldier said quietly to Lord Marak.

"You will escort me," Lord Marak replied.

The soldier nodded, but the first of the congratulatory lords had already arrived. For the next fifteen minutes, lords approached Lord Marak before leaving the room. Each of them expressed their congratulations and made a point of stating that they had voted for him. Lord Marak endured the posturing of the lords with a profound distaste, but he kept a smile upon his lips and greeted each lord courteously. When the area around his desk was finally clear of lords, Marak swiftly stepped out of the chamber. The soldier immediately joined him and escorted him to the Emperor's office.

"Ah, Lord Marak," smiled the Emperor as the Torak lord entered. "Congratulations on being elected to the Lords' Council."

"Thank you, Emperor," bowed Lord Marak. "Thank you for nominating me. I am indebted."

"The reason that I asked you here, Lord Marak," frowned the Emperor, "is to set the record straight. Do not think that I nominated you because I like you. As Emperor, I would never impose my will on the Assembly of Lords in such a fashion to show favor to one clan over another. That is a point that must be clear in your mind."

"Then why did you nominate me?" asked Lord Marak.

"For the very reasons I mentioned in my speech in the Assembly of Lords," replied the Emperor. "For too long the Lords' Council has been the haven for the same clans and the same old ideas. It is time for all of Khadora to participate in running this country. I also feel that we must entertain new ideas if we are to grow, but I am also keenly aware that many of those new ideas will be rejected. This is

something that you must learn to understand as well."

"I will endeavor to remember that," nodded Lord Marak. "Still, you did break with tradition on my behalf. You could have accomplished your goal with any of a hundred other lords."

"True," agreed the Emperor. "There is still the matter of these prophecies you believe in. I am not convinced of their validity, but I understand that you are. If there is any truth contained in those scrolls, it will benefit Khadora to have you in a position to affect change in this country. You are the only lord that met all of the requirements that I had for a candidate. That small show of support from your neighbors in the dining room last night was also impressive. You seem to have a way of making supporters out of enemies. Perhaps you can do that on a larger scale. Do not disappoint me."

"I will not disappoint you," promised Lord Marak.

"Good," grinned Emperor Bagora. "Of course, it did not hurt my decision that I do like you. Now you must purchase a house in Khadoratung. A member of the Lords' Council needs to be available in times of emergency. Fardale is much too far away to be acceptable."

"Then I shall see what is available," agreed Lord Marak.

"You will then be close enough to visit here often," smiled the Emperor. "I look forward to continuing our discussion on these prophecies. I will contact Marshal Chack and arrange for you to have larger quarters befitting a member of the Lords' Council. He will also move your seat in the Assembly of Lords to the front of the room."

"New quarters will be nice," responded Lord Marak after a moment's hesitation, "but I would like to remain where I am in the Assembly Chamber."

"Remain in the back?" questioned the Emperor. "I do not think you understand. The Lords' Council sits in the front of the room so that the other lords can follow their lead. If you remain in the rear, you will forfeit a great advantage."

"Perhaps," shrugged Lord Marak as he thought about giving up the ability to use an air tunnel in the Assembly Chamber, "but my hope is that the lords of Khadora will begin to decide things independently and not always follow the lead of others. Maybe I will change my mind at some future date."

"Very well," sighed the Emperor. "Be careful in your dealings with the Lords' Council. Your election may well bind together the factions that exist there. You should go to their dining room for your midday meal today. They will want to test your mettle, and it is best done without a large audience."

"A point well made," frowned Lord Marak. "I will go there directly."

Lord Marak left the Emperor's office. Instead of finding the

Imperial soldier who had escorted him, Chard greeted Lord Marak.

"I relieved the other man," smiled Chard. "He did not have time for a meal today so I let him go eat. Where are we bound for?"

"So I am not to be followed any more?" quipped Lord Marak.

"It was a sore point with Marshal Chack that you noticed each man sent to follow you," chuckled Chard. "Now that you are a member of the Lords' Council and only have a single squad in the capital with you, it is not unreasonable for the marshal to offer a guide."

"I like this approach better," smiled Lord Marak. "Take me to the dining room of the Lords' Council."

Chard nodded and led the way. When they arrived outside the dining room, Lord Mirakotto was in the corridor talking to Lord Jamarat.

"Not enough men for your escort," quipped Lord Mirakotto as Chard separated himself from Lord Marak and moved respectfully away from the conversation.

"I am new to the Imperial Palace," smiled Lord Marak. "I guess there are times that I need a guide."

"There will be no guide for you within the realm of the Lords' Council," Lord Mirakotto retorted. "I do not know what hold you have over the Emperor, but do not think that he will interfere in the work of the Lords' Council. He has no standing to do so. You may have taken the seat of Lord Woton, but you can never take his place."

"I do not wish to take anyone's place," Lord Marak replied steadily. "I seek only to do what is in Khadora's best interests."

"Khadora's best interests?" snapped Lord Mirakotto. "You are not yet old enough to be a lord in my mind. What the Emperor was possibly thinking when he nominated you for one of the highest posts in the land is beyond me. Enjoy your stay in the Lords' Council, Lord Marak. It will be the shortest ever recorded."

Lord Mirakotto turned and stormed into the dining room. Lord Marak shook his head and turned to see Lord Jamarat glaring at him.

"I am sorry for the loss of your brother," Lord Marak said to the Neju lord. "I did not know him personally, but I heard bits about his service to Khadora. I am sure that he will be missed."

"Do not offer your phony words to me," scowled Lord Jamarat. "All you care about is stealing his seat in the Lords' Council."

"Stealing?" frowned Lord Marak. "Let me make one thing clear to you, Lord Jamarat. I did not ask to be on the Lords' Council, nor did I ever expect to be nominated. I did not ask a single lord to vote for me. I am honored that so many did, and I will endeavor to do my best to serve Khadora as I am sure you would have, had you been elected, but do not accuse me of wrongdoing in this."

“That seat was supposed to be mine,” huffed Lord Jamarat.

“I expected it to be so,” nodded Lord Marak, “but the result is not my doing.”

“You are right,” conceded Lord Jamarat after a long pause. “The Emperor would never have spoken if Lord Kiamesh had not started it. He is the one who stole Woton’s seat. He did not want the Neju clan to be represented on the Lords’ Council.”

“Of that I know nothing,” shrugged Lord Marak as he realized that Lord Jamarat thought like a child. “You miss him, don’t you?”

A puzzled frown fell over Lord Jamarat’s face as he stared at Lord Marak. Slowly, he nodded.

“Woton was everything to me,” Lord Jamarat said as a lump formed in his throat. “You cannot understand. He protected me when I got in trouble. Now he is gone.”

“He is gone,” Lord Marak said soothingly. “Still, that does not mean that you cannot find someone to watch out for you. I know the loss of a loved one can be devastating. Perhaps I can help you when you need help. You have but to ask.”

Lord Jamarat’s eyebrows rose as the looked at the Torak lord. “Why would you help me?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” smiled Lord Marak. “Your clan is old and well respected. Should not a Khadoran help another when he needs it?”

“They should,” nodded Lord Jamarat, “but that is not the way of Khadora.”

“It is my way,” retorted Lord Marak. “If you find yourself in trouble, talk to me. I will do what I can.”

“Do you really mean that?” asked Lord Jamarat. “Or do you say that to look good in front of others?”

Lord Marak smiled as he shook his head. He stretched his arm and placed his hand on Lord Jamarat’s shoulder. “Look around, Jamarat,” he smiled. “There is nobody here to hear my words but you. When you need me, let me know.”

Lord Jamarat smiled and nodded as Lord Marak stepped into the dining room. The room was elegant. Fine fabrics adorned the walls and a row of leather chairs sat before a fireplace. In the center of the room was a long rectangular black table. Lord Mirakotto sat at one end, and Lord Kiamesh sat at the other. Lord Patel and Lord Garic were on the side closest to the door and had their backs to it. On the far side of the table was an empty chair next to Lord Quilo. As it was positioned, only Lord Quilo could observe Lord Marak enter the room. A mischievous smile spread across his face when he noticed Lord Marak, but he said nothing to interrupt the loud conversation that was currently taking place.

“This is all your fault, Kiamesh,” snarled Lord Mirakotto. “If you

had not broken with tradition, we would not have to suffer the boy lord among our ranks."

"Oh?" countered Lord Kiamesh. "And I should have just remained quiet and let you seat that imbecile brother of Lord Woton among us? Jamarat has the wits of a ten year old. He would bark if you commanded him to."

"Which would have suited Lord Mirakotto just fine," interjected Lord Patel. "It is no secret that Lord Woton was your man, Mirakotto. You merely sought to replace him with Jamarat to retain your power over this council. Now you shall have to vie for votes the same as we all do."

"At least Lord Faliman was from a founding clan," added Lord Kiamesh. "Now we are stuck with a man who should not even be a lord. This makes a mockery of the Lords' Council. You should have stopped the Emperor, Garic."

"Don't you think I wanted to?" defended Lord Garic. "If we had had any advance notice of what the Emperor was up to, we could have worked around it. There was nothing that I could do."

"Welcome, Lord Marak," chuckled Lord Quilo when he thought he had had enough fun at the expense of his fellow lords. "Welcome to the Lords' Council."

The other lords snapped their heads to see Lord Marak standing near the door. Lord Quilo started laughing, and the other lords shot him dark glares.

"So the boy lord has come to the table," scowled Lord Mirakotto. "Is it normal in the frontier for people to stand behind the backs of others and eavesdrop on their conversations?"

Lord Marak walked around the table and sat in the empty chair. He fixed his gaze on Lord Mirakotto.

"About as normal as it is in the capital to place personal power over the good of the country," he said softly to Lord Mirakotto. "Please pass the tea."

"You make light of this?" snapped Lord Mirakotto. "My son is older than you, and he is years away from being ready to run a clan, not to mention sitting on the Lords' Council."

"And you would prefer that an older man sit here?" retorted Lord Marak. "Even if he does have the mind of a child? Look, Mirakotto, I did not ask for this seat, nor did I seek it in any way, but I am here now. We can act like adults and try our best to do the right thing for Khadora, or we can play childish games. Which shall it be?"

"Do not lecture me!" shouted Lord Mirakotto as he pushed back his chair and rose threateningly. "You may have gotten a seat on this council, but you will not be here for long."

Lord Marak picked up the knife that was on the table before him.

He let his eyes drop as he held the knife by the blade. For a long moment the room was deathly silent. Then Lord Marak looked up and locked his eyes on Lord Mirakotto's.

"How long any of us will serve here is open to debate," Lord Marak said in a stern tone as Lord Mirakotto's eyes were drawn to the knife. "It is a debate that I am not ready to join at the moment. Do not push me, Mirakotto. You will strain your old heart."

A long tense moment of silence followed Lord Marak's threat.

"Well," Lord Quilo said lightheartedly as he pushed back his chair and rose. "This has been a most interesting meal, but I have business to attend to."

"As do I," Lord Kiamesh nodded gravely as he too rose.

Lord Mirakotto snarled and spun towards the door. He stormed out of the room, and Lord Quilo and Lord Kiamesh followed him.

"You should not push him," Lord Garic said softly to Lord Marak. "Woton was a dear friend of his."

"I do not attack others," Lord Marak replied as his eyes glanced towards Lord Patel, "unless I am attacked, but I can be counted on to defend myself without remorse."

A thin smile crossed Lord Patel's lips as Lord Garic rose and left the room. "A wonderful start," Lord Patel quipped. "Not even the first day and you have made a powerful enemy. I would watch that one if I were you. Lord Mirakotto has been known to strike when it is least expected."

"That is a sound strategy," Lord Marak smiled in return as he rang the bell for a servant so that he could order his meal.

"There is no need to hurry your meal," Lord Patel offered. "This afternoon's meeting of the Assembly of Lords will be dry and uninteresting. It will be mostly closing comments. Unless of course you are eager to wallow in the ingratiating compliments that will be showered upon you."

"That is not something that concerns me," Lord Marak shook his head. "I am not interested in such things. Why only closing comments? There is another day of meetings scheduled."

"Not any more," Lord Patel replied. "The Emperor is declaring tomorrow a day of mourning for Lord Woton. The Assembly of Lords will be shortened."

"Will the Lords' Council meet?" questioned Lord Marak. "Or is everyone returning home?"

"There is no pressing business before the Lords' Council," answered Lord Patel. "I am not sure what the others are doing, but I am going home today. What are your plans, Lord Marak?"

Lord Marak could not help but smile as he pictured Lord Patel rushing home to organize an ambush of Lord Marak's party returning

to Fardale.

"I will linger in Khadoratung for a few days," replied Lord Marak. "I need to find a residence in the city now that much of my time will be spent here. Perhaps I will return to Fardale the beginning of next week."

"Well," Lord Patel smiled innocently as he rose to leave, "I hope you have a safe journey home."

Lord Patel left as the servant appeared to take Lord Marak's order. After listening to the meal choices, Lord Marak decided to forego the midday meal. He finished his tea and left the dining room. Chard was waiting for him in the corridor.

"That was a short meal," commented Chard.

"Indeed it was," nodded Lord Marak. "It was not as comfortable as a family reunion."

"I can imagine," chuckled the Imperial soldier. "I watched Lord Mirakotto storm out of there. He was not a happy man."

"Lord Mirakotto has problems with controlling his anger," shrugged Lord Marak. "I wish to return to my quarters."

Chard nodded and led the way downstairs. When they reached the Torak quarters, Lord Marak released Chard to go and eat. Lord Marak entered the quarters and the room exploded in congratulations.

"What a day!" grinned Botal. "It is hard to believe that the Torak clan has a seat on the Lords' Council."

"Indeed," smiled Lord Marak. "I had hoped one day to get one of my clans on the Lords' Council, but I never expected it to be me. Now we must make use of it. Latril, join me in the garden."

Latril nodded and they left the quarters and went to the garden. They sat on a bench and appeared to be talking to each other while Latril wove an air tunnel to Fardale.

"You could be doing this yourself," Latril pointed out. "Why do you need me?"

"I would look rather suspicious speaking to myself," chuckled Lord Marak. "Besides, my abilities are not known yet. I prefer it to remain that way."

Latril nodded as she completed the link. Lord Marshal Yenga immediately congratulated Lord Marak on his rise to the Lords' Council.

"How did you know?" asked Lord Marak.

"Mistake contacted us," explained Yenga. "It seems the word is all over Khadoratung already. Will you want a larger escort for the trip home? I imagine that your enemies will be more determined than ever to kill you now."

"Actually," frowned Lord Marak, "I will be buying a home in Khadoratung. Ask Kasa to arrange our finances and I will contact her

when I find out the price. As for the escort, I will have more than enough. How are our troops doing in Deep Bend?"

"Everything there is quiet," answered Lord Marshal Yenga. "There have been no reinforcements sent from the Imperial Valley. We can take the estate will little effort."

"Order it," decided Lord Marak. "I want it taken with a minimum of bloodshed, but it must be in our hands two days from now. Let no word escape that we have taken it."

"This is a large risk," warned Yenga. "I would not be fulfilling my duty as your Lord Marshal if I did not warn you that attacking a member of the Lords' Council is asking for war."

"You have fulfilled your duty," Lord Marak noted. "Before midday, two days from now, I want you to release one of the special birds at the Sorgan estate. The message is simple. Let Lord Patel know that we have seized his estate at Deep Bend, and it is now a Torak estate. I want the bird to arrive in the Imperial Valley close to midday. Can you do that?"

"It will be as you command," Lord Marshal Yenga replied with obvious concern in his voice. "I hope you know what you are doing."

"I hope so as well," conceded Lord Marak as he wove his own air tunnel to the two cortes he had stationed outside the city of Khadoratung. "I will contact you as soon as my plans are solidified."

Lord Marak indicated that Latril should drop her air tunnel as he made contact with the air mage attached to Cortain Tagoro's corte.

"Lord Marak?" asked Cortain Tagoro. "Are you ready to leave the city?"

"Not yet," answered Lord Marak, "but you are. I want your men to move out tonight. We have two days to accomplish our goal so plan accordingly. Secrecy is most important. I will meet you there two days from tonight. Scout it out for a bloodless entry."

"You may count on it," assured Tagoro. "Will Botal's squad be enough to protect you?"

"It will have to do," answered Lord Marak. "Lord Patel does not expect me to be leaving Khadoratung until next week so I think I will be fine."

"He is probably not your only enemy," warned Cortain Tagoro. "Others will watch you closely."

"More than you know," agreed Lord Marak. "I have been elected to the Lords' Council. I imagine that the number of lords out to get me has grown tremendously today."

"Lords' Council?" echoed Tagoro. "That is fantastic news. The men will be thrilled to learn of this."

"Just make sure that they do not celebrate noisily," warned Lord Marak as he saw Chard approaching. "Loss of secrecy at this point

would cost a lot of lives. I have to go."

Lord Marak dropped his air tunnel as Chard approached.

"I appreciated the meal break," stated Chard, "but I thought you would stay in your quarters. I would be punished if you were found alone."

"I am sorry, Chard," smiled Lord Marak, "but Latril and I needed to talk. I will not jeopardize your position again. It was thoughtless of me."

"It turned out all right," shrugged Chard. "Where to now?"

"I need to speak with the Lords' Council mediator, Katzu," declared Lord Marak.

Chapter 17

Marketplace

"Mistake!" called a voice in the marketplace of Khadoratung.

The small Fakaran twirled around, her eyes searching the hundreds of faces around her. Eventually, her eyes rested on the old man wearing the white and blue colors of the Pikata clan. The man was hurrying towards her. A cold shiver ran down Mistake's spine as she remembered her short period of slavery at the Pikata estate.

"It is you!" he smiled. "How are you? Is Rejji with you?"

"Bursar Wicado," Mistake greeted coldly. "Rejji is back in Fakara."

"Fakara?" the bursar echoed happily. "I am so glad to hear that."

"Are you?" countered Mistake. "Why would you be happy if Khadora had one less slave?"

An old man dressed in the brown and yellow of the Kamaril clan passed between the bursar and Mistake. He stepped up to a stall and proceeded to inspect the merchant's merchandise. The merchant noticed the Kamaril pin on the man that denoted a member of the lord's family. He smiled in anticipation of a profitable sale.

"You misunderstand me," frowned Bursar Wicado. "I never wanted anything but the best for Rejji. And you and Bakhai," he added. "It was not I who enslaved you. I did my best to treat Rejji well and teach him what I knew. I also arranged for the three of you to stay together. Please do not burden me with your hatred of slavery."

Mistake's scowl slowly faded as she realized that the bursar had been kind to them. "I am sorry," apologized Mistake. "You bring back memories that are best forgotten."

"Does that mean that Rejji was successful in gaining your freedom?" asked the bursar. "Or did he run away and make it home to Fakara?"

"We did not run away," answered Mistake. "All three of us are free people now. We work for the future of Fakara."

"The future of Fakara?" questioned Wicado. "That is high sounding, but I fear that Fakara has little future."

"Sure it does," scowled Mistake. "How can you say such a thing? Rejji has united the free tribes and built a grand city. For the first time in a long time, Fakara's future is bright."

"Rejji united the free tribes?" Wicado said with shock evident upon his face. "I had heard that there were great battles in Fakara,

and that some man had brought the tribes together, but I never imagined Rejji as a warrior."

"He is much more than a warrior," asserted Mistake. "He is more like a king. The people of Fakara worship him. He is building two more cities right now. Pretty soon, Fakara will be the equal of Khadora. You will be famous in Khadora for having known him in the early days."

"I am happy to hear your tales, Mistake," frowned the bursar, "but I cannot help but sense a little exaggeration in your tale. Fakara will never amount to anything without food for its people. The Fakarans are starving."

"They are not," Mistake retorted adamantly. "Rejji has supplied food for everyone."

"Then why are the Fakarans fleeing?" shrugged the bursar. "I am sorry, Mistake, but it will take more than wishful thinking to restore Fakara."

"Fleeing?" Mistake asked skeptically. "What do you mean fleeing?"

"Thousands of them have come to the Pikata estate in the last month," declared Wicado. "They seem eager to fight just to earn the food they eat."

"Thousands?" echoed Mistake as she tried to imagine Fakarans streaming across the border. "What color scarves do they wear?"

"Red," answered the bursar, "as all Fakarans do."

"Not all," frowned Mistake. "Red is the color of the Jiadin. They are not Rejji's people. In fact, they are the enemies of the free tribes. Rejji's forces destroyed the leadership of the Jiadin and sent the remnants fleeing for their lives. Why are they coming to Khadora?"

"I am not sure," admitted Wicado. "They started coming in droves the day after Marshal Ulmreto died. I am still confused about that day's events. Lord Damirath has never been the same since."

"I don't understand," Mistake said. "Why does your lord allow them to come?"

"I don't understand it either," confessed Wicado. "We have more warriors than we can ever possibly use, and yet they keep coming. Worse, Lord Damirath has given free reign over them to a Fakaran! It is not right. Brakas runs around like he is the marshal, and the man is not even Khadoran."

"Brakas?" echoed Mistake as her body twitched. "How did Brakas get into this?"

"You know him?" inquired Bursar Wicado.

"I do," nodded Mistake, "but I do not like him."

"Nor do I," Wicado admitted softly.

"Why is he in Khadora?" inquired Mistake.

“He appears to be a friend of Lord Damirath’s,” shrugged the bursar, “but I cannot understand why. I am sure they never met before the day that he and Zygor arrived. How can one become a friend of a lord in only an hour?”

“Zygor is at the Pikata estate as well as Brakas?” asked Mistake as an ill feeling began to worm its way into her body.

“Well Zygor and Brakas did come together on the first day,” replied the bursar. “That was the day that the marshal died. I never saw Zygor leave, and I have not seen him since, but that is when all of this began. I do not know what to make of it.”

“You had best be careful, Bursar Wicado,” warned Mistake. “Those are people that will kill you if they feel like it. Never mention my name or Rejji’s to them. They will mark you for death.”

“They know Rejji?” asked the bursar.

“Oh yes,” nodded Mistake. “I told you that Rejji united the free tribes and destroyed the Jiadin. I was not exaggerating. Rejji is the ruler of Fakara. Brakas and Zygor were both working for Grulak. They would do anything to strike back at Rejji or anyone who knows him. Your life would be in danger.”

“I knew he was a bright lad,” mentioned Wicado, “but I never imagined what he would become. If you see him again, tell him how happy I am for him.”

“I will,” promised Mistake as she turned and left.

The Kamaril family member who had been examining the wares at the nearby stall abruptly put down the merchandise he was holding and walked swiftly away.

* * *

Lord Marak stood at the rear of the Assembly Chamber following the closing statements of the Assembly of Lords. Lords gathered around him to hear his words of wisdom concerning slavery, but none of them seemed eager to be the first to abandon their slaves. Finally, Lord Marak realized that it would take more than a discount and his ascension to the Lords’ Council to start his reforms. He excused himself from the group and returned to his quarters.

“Halman, Gunta, and Latril,” Lord Marak said as he entered the room, “you will be joining me for a trip into the city. I have heard about a house for sale and would like to inspect it.”

Gunta and Halman immediately retrieved their weapons and strapped them on. Gunta brought Lord Marak’s weapons to him.

“Botal,” Lord Marak continued as he strapped on his own weapons, “I want the rest of the men to mingle with the other troops before they leave for home. Try to make some friends that we can use for future contacts. I would be especially interested in a contact at the main Neju estate. I want to know who Lord Jamarat’s main advisors

are."

Botal nodded and Lord Marak and his escort left the room. A group of lords stood in the foyer outside the Assembly Chamber, and Lord Marak's group had to pass through them. Marak felt a slight warming sensation on his shoulder. He stopped just past the group and turned to look at them. His hand reached over his shoulder and felt the hilt of his sword. It was warm to his touch. His eyes scanned the large group of lords, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. He shook his head and continued towards the entry foyer. He did not notice Lord Damirath's eyes burning with hatred behind his back.

Lord Marak left the Imperial Palace and strode through the large park and towards the marketplace. As they entered the marketplace, someone shouted that the new member of the Lords' Council was coming. Lord Marak was unprepared for the onslaught.

Dozens of people raced towards Lord Marak and soon the large crowd encircled him. Women tried to kiss his hand or shove flowers into his hair. Men tried eagerly to be the one to shake the Lord Marak's hand. Halman and Gunta tried furiously to remain next to Lord Marak without harming the mass of admirers. It was a losing battle. People started shoving, and Halman and Gunta became more adamant about maintaining security.

Within moments, the Imperial guards stationed around the marketplace rushed to disperse the group. The Imperial guards were not gentle as they forcibly pulled people away from Lord Marak. Latril was grabbed by an Imperial guard and shoved away from Lord Marak. Other citizens were pushed and shoved, some of them sprawling on the ground only to be stepped upon by others.

"Make way," shouted Gunta as he and Halman moved in front of Lord Marak and tried to force a path through the crowd.

The Imperial troops worked their way towards Lord Marak, clearing away the citizens. Suddenly, Lord Marak felt a jab in his back. He involuntarily leaped forward, knocking into Gunta. Gunta spun and saw a look of pain on Lord Marak's face. He immediately drew his sword from his sheath and shouted for everyone to get away. Halman also drew his sword, and the crowd ran away screaming.

Lord Marak's face was sweating and Gunta sheathed his sword and wrapped his arms around Lord Marak because he feared that the Torak lord might fall. The Imperial troops formed a protective ring around the three Torak warriors and kept the citizens away. Halman sheathed his sword and shook his head as he gazed at the debris upon the ground. Flowers with broken stems, jewelry, and pieces of cloth littered the ground, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the dagger. He raced to the dagger and picked it up. Its blade was coated with a brown substance.

“Assassin,” Halman shouted to Gunta. “Get him somewhere safe. Now!”

Gunta hoisted Lord Marak over his shoulder and dashed towards the nearest inn. The Imperial troops that had made a ring around the trio had heard Halman’s warning. They saw where Gunta was heading, and they pushed the crowd out of the way. Halman sprinted past Gunta and threw open the door to the common room. He drew his sword menacingly and ordered everyone out the back door. The few patrons in the common room fled as Gunta entered the inn.

Gunta placed Lord Marak face down on one of the tables. Halman ran to the front door and ordered the Imperial guards to surround the building. They immediately obeyed. Gunta saw the hole in Lord Marak’s cape and frowned.

“He has been stabbed,” Gunta announced, “but the hole is small. I doubt it can be too bad.”

“Get his clothes off,” ordered Halman. “The blade was poisoned.”

“What type of poison?” asked Lord Marak with a pained voice.

“The blade is brown,” answered Halman as he helped Gunta remove Marak’s clothes.

“It is not quick acting,” Lord Marak sighed with relief. “Cut the affected area out quickly.”

“I never saw the innkeeper or the kitchen staff leave,” commented. Halman. “Unless they have a door to the outside from kitchen, they will still be in there. I will get some water boiled up.”

Gunta merely nodded as he removed the Qubari armor from Lord Marak’s back. He ran his fingers over the Torak lord’s back until he found the cut.

“It is small,” he remarked.

“Amazing,” commented Lord Marak. “The force of the blow was quite staggering. I shudder to think what would have happened without the Qubari armor.”

“You would be dead,” frowned Gunta. “You can no longer move about with just the two of us for an escort. We failed you today.”

“You have not failed me yet,” Lord Marak tried to smile. “I did not expect such a reaction from the citizens. Do you think it is normal for this to happen to someone who is elected to the Lords’ Council?”

“I do not know,” answered Gunta, “but I intend to find out.”

Halman returned with a pot of boiling water, a sharp knife, and some clean pieces of cloth. The innkeeper looked nervously from the kitchen doorway.

“Come and help,” Gunta called to the innkeeper.

The old man hurried across the room.

“Is it poison?” he asked.

“It is,” nodded Gunta. “We must cut the flesh around it and

removed the poisoned area."

"There is a better way," the innkeeper offered nervously. "May I return to the kitchen?"

Gunta stared at the old man for a moment and then nodded. "Be aware that your life is tied to Lord Marak's," he warned the innkeeper. "If he dies, you do as well."

The old man nodded as he ran into the kitchen. He came right back with two small pouches of powder. Gunta watched as the old man dipped a rag into the boiling water and proceeded to wash the contaminated area. He then sprinkled a white powder on the wound.

"This will draw the poison to the surface," the innkeeper said. "It will draw a fair amount of blood as well so do not be alarmed at the bleeding."

Halman and Gunta watched as the wound began to bubble through the white powder. Within a few minutes, there was a brownish clump of substance on Lord Marak's back. Gunta thought it resembled dark oatmeal. The innkeeper took another cloth and wiped the mass away. He poured a small amount of hot water on the wound and then opened the other pouch. He sprinkled a yellow powder on the wound and walked over to the fireplace and procured a burning stick.

"This will ignite," he cautioned. "Do not be worried. It will seal the wound so it does not become infected."

He brought the burning stick to the yellow powder and a flame leaped from Lord Marak's back. Lord Marak grunted in pain, but the fire extinguish quickly.

"You are fortunate that it was such a small incision," commented the innkeeper. "He will be fine in an hour or two."

"Where did you learn this skill?" asked Lord Marak as he struggled to turn over and sit up.

"I learned in my youth," answered the innkeeper. "There were many assassinations in Khadoratung at that time. Not like today. Use of poison was a favorite, so that you did not need to be very skilled to kill. I was an apprentice to a healer in those days. I have always kept pouches of the powders ever since. Never got to use them until today."

"Well I am fortunate to have been close to your inn," smiled Lord Marak. "You have saved my life."

"Not really," smiled the old man. "What your boys were about to do would work just as well. This just avoids taking a chunk of your flesh away. It also heals you quicker so you can continue fighting."

"Well, I am still grateful," smiled Lord Marak. "How can I repay you?"

"Take seats," grinned the old man. "I will bring out today's best meal for the three of you. I am just pleased to be able to serve the

newest member of the Lords' Council."

"Is it common for people to mob a new member?" asked Lord Marak. "I certainly did not expect it."

"It is not common," frowned the innkeeper. "I would suspect that someone organized it in order to get close to you. The people are easily aroused. I can see someone having no difficulty in getting others to mob you, but that is something citizens would not dare do without prompting. I guess people don't like to think much for themselves these days. They are herded like clova."

"So we must look for the shepherd," Lord Marak remarked softly when the innkeeper had returned to the kitchen. "Someone had to instigate that welcome for me. If we can find those who were in the crowd, we will know the identity of the assassin."

"I will go out and find Latril," offered Halman. "I doubt the Imperial troops will allow her through their ring of protection. Should I send for the rest of our men?"

"No," Lord Marak shook his head. "There will not be a repeat of the attack today. The next time we travel in public, my enemies will be surprised to see a full squad as my escort."

Lord Marak dressed and sat at a table with Gunta. Several minutes later, Halman returned with Latril.

"The Imperial guards are removing the ring of protection," Halman stated. "They will leave two men at each door, but the rest will return to their patrols."

"That is fine," nodded Lord Marak. "Our enemy knows that we will be alert now. He will not chance it again today. Are you all right, Latril?"

"I am fine," nodded Latril. "The Imperial troops were a little rough in disbanding the crowd, but I think everyone understood. Are you hurt?"

"Not really," smiled Lord Marak. "How large was the hole, Gunta?"

"Just the very tip of the blade," Gunta replied. "If it was not poisoned, it would not have been worth bothering with."

The innkeeper returned with three plates of wasooki and saw Latril had joined the group. He hurried back to the kitchen and brought out a fourth plate for her.

"Where are we heading?" asked Halman. "Maybe I can go on ahead and check out the area."

"There is a broker just a few doors down," Lord Marak stated. "Stay and eat. We will travel together."

"They have a back door," offered the innkeeper. "There will be very few people out back this time of day."

Lord Marak nodded and the Toraks finished their meal. Lord

Marak issued a script for a thousand gold and handed it to the innkeeper as he left. The innkeeper smiled broadly as he held the door open for Lord Marak.

The group passed through the two Imperial guards and moved swiftly to the broker's back door. They entered the office and the broker greeted them with a friendly smile. Lord Marak walked to a map hanging on the wall, which depicted the city of Khadoratung and showed all of the buildings in the city.

"Is there a particular section of the city you are looking to invest in?" asked the broker.

Lord Marak put his finger on the map and pointed to a building not far from the side of the Imperial Palace.

"I have heard that this building is for sale," Lord Marak stated. "I would like to visit it."

"Certainly," nodded the broker, "but it is hardly fit for the residence of a member of the Lords' Council, Lord Marak."

"Why not?" questioned the Torak lord. "It is close to the palace."

"Yes," frowned the broker. "It is close, but it hardly is befitting your station. As you can see, the building fronts on two parallel streets, but only half of it is a residence. The other half hosts a tavern. It was the house of a merchant, and he rented the tavern portion out, but you would have to make major renovations to restore it to one dwelling. I have properties for sale that are much better for your purpose."

"Perhaps," responded Lord Marak, "but I will see this one first. Give me the keys, and we shall go examine it. If it is not suitable, I will let you show me others."

"Very well, Lord Marak," sighed the broker as he opened a drawer and handed the keys to Lord Marak. "I did warn you."

They walked out the back door of the broker's office. Another man dressed as a Torak soldier was waiting for them. Lord Marak nodded to Fisher as the spy casually joined the group as they walked the few blocks over to inspect the building. No words were spoken until they had entered the old house.

"I heard that you had a bit of a problem in the marketplace," Fisher said softly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," nodded Lord Marak as his eyes gazed about the old structure. "Is this the house that you wanted me to see?"

"It is," chuckled Fisher. "I know it does not look like much, but you will see why I recommended it. Come upstairs."

The building was in an older part of Khadoratung, and it was four stories tall with a basement underneath it. Fisher led the way to the top floor.

"Look out the window," smiled Fisher.

Lord Marak gazed out the window. The view of the front of the palace was over the roofs of the other houses on the block. He nodded in appreciation.

"There is more," smiled Fisher. "The building used to stretch through to the next street, but a merchant divided it and had a tavern put in the other half."

"So the broker mentioned," nodded Lord Marak.

"They closed up everything that connects the two except the basement," Fisher continued. "That door is merely locked on both sides."

"How does that help me?" asked Lord Marak.

"It allows you to have people come and go without being seen," grinned Fisher. "I have already talked to the tavern owner. He is old and willing to sell his business. If you could arrange for a free man to buy the tavern business, it would never be tied to you."

"And spies could go to the tavern and end up in my home," nodded Lord Marak. "That does have merit."

"There is also an unimpeded view of the rear of the palace from above the tavern," added Fisher. "Right now the tavern owner lives above the tavern. The two floors above him are empty and unused. You could modify the structure so that your upper floors ran across the whole building and no one would be the wiser."

"Meaning we could house several cortes comfortably in a house that appears to be only capable of holding two squads," grinned Lord Marak. "I should never doubt your analysis, Fisher. This building will do splendidly."

"What about its location, though?" questioned Gunta. "A member of the Lords' Council is expected to live much finer than this. Won't that cause the other lords to not take you seriously?"

"It would," frowned Lord Marak. "While I would normally not care how I am viewed, this election to the Lords' Council requires a few changes on my part."

"There is more than one lord who has multiple residences in Khadoratung," Fisher offered. "Use this one as your residence, and buy another for show. You could also use the larger one for entertaining. That way there will never be a reason for outsiders to enter this building."

"I agree," responded Lord Marak. "Find me a large estate along the river just south of the city, preferably around the bend from the docks of the city. I want to be able to have troops arrive by river during the night without anyone noticing."

"Are you expecting to wage war in Khadoratung?" questioned Halman.

"I am not expecting it," answered Lord Marak, "but I am

preparing for it. I will be setting up new cortes of Torak troops chosen from the clans that owe allegiance to me. Lectain Zorkil is already working on that. I do not expect my enemies to attack me only outside the city. Today was a good indication that my thoughts are valid. This time it was a lone assassin, but it may very well evolve into open warfare before long."

Chapter 18

An Act of War

Mistake finished her meal in the Wine Press Inn and slipped out the back door. She looked both ways and saw a series of wagons coming up the street. She dashed in front of the lead wagon and was going to dart down an alley when she stopped and turned around to look at the road. The four wagons coming down the street were lashed together with only two drivers. The first driver was a large bear of a man draped in a black cloak and hood. He sent shivers down Mistake's spine, just as he had in the inn. The other driver was the young soldier she had seen with the mystery man the day she had arrived in Khadoratung, but he no longer wore his brown and yellow uniform. Now the man was clothed in a simple brown tunic and pants. The wagons were loaded down with sacks of seed, except for the last, which carried six wasooki and six clova. She watched in puzzlement as the wagons rolled by. She was not sure who the men were, but she was sure that they were not farmers.

Mistake shook her head and ran down the alley. She used the alley to cross several blocks of the city before turning onto one of the streets. She slowed down to a fast walk until she reached the house that Lord Marak had purchased. She loped up the steps and the door opened as she reached for it. Mistake smiled at HawkShadow as she slid through the doorway.

"Now we can get started," taunted HawkShadow. "I have always wondered how those who are so blessed with speed can always be the ones who arrive late."

"I was eating," protested Mistake. "It is not good to hurry your meals."

"There is no rush for this meeting," smiled Lord Marak as he waved Mistake into one of the rooms. "In fact, the purpose of this meeting is to determine where you three go from here."

"Our mission is complete," announced StarWind. "General Didyk has given us the slip."

"I suppose that I will accompany the Sakovans back to the Sakova," shrugged Mistake. "Rejji has no need of me right now."

HawkShadow gazed at Lord Marak expectantly. "You did not bring us here to bid us a safe journey," HawkShadow finally said. "What did you have in mind?"

Lord Marak grinned. "I am planning a delicate mission, and I

could use some of your talents," he replied. "Two Sakovans who are nearly invisible in the wild and know how to make an air tunnel would be a great asset to me at this time."

"I know how to make an air tunnel," interrupted Mistake. "I can be invisible, too."

"I have something a little different in mind for you, Mistake," chuckled Lord Marak. "I will get to it in a moment."

"I am game," offered HawkShadow. "I could even be talked into teaching the little elf how to move silently."

Mistake frowned and opened her mouth to protest, but Lord Marak cut her off. "Your tutoring her could be of great help," Lord Marak stated, "but my time is short. We will be leaving before sun up."

"Tomorrow morning?" asked StarWind.

"Yes," nodded Lord Marak. "We will begin to gather after midnight. I want to be well outside the city before dawn breaks."

"What do I get to do?" asked Mistake.

"Do you still carry that blow tube the Qubari gave you?" asked the Torak lord.

"Of course," nodded Mistake. "It is always ready. What darts are you thinking of?"

"The tyrik venom," replied Lord Marak. "How long do the effects last?"

"About three hours for a fair-sized man," shrugged Mistake. "Maybe less if it is a big man. I only have six tyrik darts. There are other types of darts, though."

"Six should be enough," declared Lord Marak. "I am not looking to kill with the darts, so only the tyrik venom will be used. If you could spend some time with HawkShadow today, Mistake, it would be of benefit to the mission."

"I will," promised Mistake as she began to get excited about going on a mission with the Toraks.

"Any news about the assassin?" asked Lord Marak.

"Not much," frowned StarWind. "I did pick up a piece of curious knowledge in the marketplace concerning the attack on you. Everyone was confused about what was happening, but more than one person remembered seeing an Imperial guard running away from the attack. I found that most strange. Even better is the description that people agreed on. This Imperial soldier was wearing gloves."

"That is interesting news," frowned Lord Marak. "Did anyone remember anything else about him? His face? Scars? Anything?"

"No," StarWind shook her head. "Too much attention was drawn your way."

"That is more knowledge than we had before," shrugged Lord

Marak. “Come over to this map and I will explain what I need you to do.”

* * *

Botal looked around the empty suite for anything his men might have left behind. Satisfied that everything had been taken, he left the suite and stepped into the corridor. The Imperial Palace was dim and desolate, everyone having gone to bed hours before. He had dispatched his men over the last few hours in groups of two, and now he was the only one left. Botal adjusted his weapons and strode quietly along the corridor. He passed through the entry foyer and was stopped at the door leaving the palace by two solitary Imperial guards.

“Another Torak?” questioned the guard. “Don’t you fellows get any sleep? I saw two of you leave the palace not an hour ago.”

“That is why I am leaving,” frowned Squad Leader Botal. “I need to catch up to them. They are on an errand for Lord Marak.”

“You will have to hurry then,” smiled the guard as he opened the door. “They headed towards the stables quite some time ago.”

Botal nodded and ran towards the stables. He mounted his horse and rode out of the city to the meeting spot they had previously selected.

“Any problems, Botal?” inquired Lord Marak.

“A mention of two other Torak soldiers leaving, but it was just friendly banter,” reported Botal. “We will be long gone before anyone notices that the Torak quarters are empty.”

“Excellent,” Lord Marak said. “StarWind? HawkShadow? Are both of you comfortable with this plan? You do not have to take part in this if you do not want to.”

“We are comfortable with it,” volunteered StarWind. “Since General Didyk has already left Khadoratung, there is nothing left here for us to do. We might as well aid in your troubles.”

“I would prefer to be by your side in this Lord Marak,” interjected HawkShadow, “but I understand the need for what StarWind and I are doing. We have the skills necessary. You can count on us.”

“I am not very comfortable with this,” sighed Katzu. “As a Lords’ Council mediator, I have no business being involved in whatever it is that you are about to do. I cannot favor one clan over another. It goes against the very nature of the Lords’ Council.”

“Which is why I have not told you what we intend to do,” smiled Lord Marak. “Katzu, you are only traveling with us because you will have to mediate a dispute. If I told you ahead of time where you were needed, wouldn’t that then give you advance notice of what I intend to do?”

“It probably would,” nodded the mediator.

“And if your prompt mediation of a dispute could save lives,” Lord Marak continued, “wouldn’t you want to be close by to do your duty?”

“Certainly,” Katzu replied as he felt the logical net closing around him.

“And above all,” grinned Lord Marak, “is it not your desire to see justice done in Khadora and honesty upheld at the highest levels?”

“That is my desire, Lord Marak,” Katzu replied testily, “but why do I feel as if I am being used by one clan against another?”

“Katzu,” soothed Lord Marak, “every dispute that you mediate is the result of someone trying to use your judgment against someone else. That is why you are called upon to mediate. If no one thought your words could be used to gain advantage over another lord, your services would never be called for.”

“I will grant you that, although it is a strange way of looking at mediation,” Katzu shook his head. “Lords do not normally drag me off to battle.”

“I have no intention of dragging you off to battle,” promised Lord Marak. “I am merely inviting you to end a dispute. If I sent a messenger to Khadoratung, you would hurry to where we are going and perform the mediation gladly. I am just trying to save time and lives by making sure that you are close by.”

“If my coming with you will truly save lives,” sighed Katzu, “then I cannot argue with your methods. I will forewarn you, however, that my going with you will in no way affect my mediation. I will not compromise myself for anyone, not even the Emperor.”

“I would never ask you to do so,” Lord Marak said seriously. “The mediators of the Lords’ Council are the strength of Khadora. If you and your kind start to waver, then we are a nation without hope.”

“I am glad that you understand that,” nodded Katzu. “Lead me to this mediation, but do not tell me anything of what is to come. I do not wish to know the details until the mediation begins.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Lord Marak as he signaled for Botal to lead the group forward.

* * *

The night air was cool as the column of Nordon soldiers rode down out of the Bear Mountains near Deep Bend. The stars were bright, and the moon was nearly full. The cortain led his column in silence as he rode off the mountain trail and onto the main road. Although the sun would not rise for a few hours yet, the men were alert and ready for battle.

As the column of green and white soldiers neared the Nordon estate, the cortain’s fingers moved rapidly over his head. The unspoken command was superfluous. Each member of the Nordon

corte knew his task by heart, and the signal to be alert was merely a force of habit.

The Nordon corte turned onto the estate road leading to the mansion. The guards at the gate waved uncaringly as the soldiers rode by. As the corte approached the mansion, the cortain turned towards the guest barracks. The two sentries outside the mansion watched the procession with halfhearted interest. They had seen this particular corte leave and return at strange hours of the day and night. They were guests from the main estate in the Imperial Valley and nobody paid any attention to their comings and goings.

Cortain Talli dismounted around the corner of the mansion. His troops immediately followed his lead. Two men gathered around the cortain as the others tethered their horses and waited silently. Everyone remained poised, their attention glued to the cortain.

Cortain Talli nodded with exaggeration and started walking towards the front of the mansion. The two escorting soldiers immediately followed him. The rest of the corte turned and began executing their assigned tasks. The three men rounded the corner of the mansion and strode purposely towards the door of the mansion. They were halfway to the door before the two guards even noticed them. One of the guards nudged the other causing him to look towards the approaching soldiers. As the three men got closer, it became obvious that they were heading into the mansion. The two guards stiffened.

“I hope you aren’t planning on waking anyone,” one of the guards said softly to the approaching men.

“I must,” Cortain Talli said with feigned exasperation. “I need to speak with Marshal GeHert right away.”

“Can’t it wait until morning?” objected the guard. “He has a nasty temper when he is awakened without reason.”

“It is not without reason,” responded Cortain Talli as he mounted the steps and approached the door.

“Hey,” said the other guard as he turned to follow the cortain. “You aren’t the same cortain that led the men out. What happened to the other one?”

The first guard also turned to look at the cortain. Neither of the guards realized their mistake until the two men escorting the cortain had attacked them from behind. The attack was not brutal. The fake Nordon soldiers looped wires over the men’s heads and tightened them. The cortain turned around and held his finger to his lips.

“Not a sound and you will both live,” smiled the cortain. “I am going to gag you and then you will be bound. If you make no noise, you will be freed in an hour or two. Do you understand?”

Both men tried to nod, but the wire nooses restricted their

movement. They held their hands up in a show of submission.

"Good," smiled the cortain as he watched several of his men running silently across the lawn in front of the mansion.

Talli stuffed clean rags in the men's mouths while the soldiers holding them bound their arms behind them.

"Take them around to the side of the mansion," instructed Cortain Talli. "Make them comfortable and then return here to rejoin me. I am going to speak to Lord Grentle."

Cortain Talli stripped off his Nordon uniform and dropped it on the porch. He straightened his Torak uniform and observed his men as they secured the barracks by barricading the doors. Two men quietly raced up the road to the gate and subdued the gate guards. Cortain Talli could see another corte of Torak troops riding onto the estate. The two men who had tied up the guards returned wearing Torak black and silver. Talli turned and opened the door to the mansion.

The three Torak soldiers walked softly up the stairs and entered the lord's suite. They passed through his sitting room and into his sleeping chamber. The lord's wife awoke when they entered. She sat up with a look of horror on her face, but she did not scream. She reached over and woke up Lord Grentle.

"Who are you?" Lord Grentle asked with a sigh.

"I am Cortain Talli of the Torak clan," answered the cortain. "I have come to seize your estate in the name of Lord Marak."

"Does this have to do with the guest troops that we have been housing?" asked Lord Grentle.

"It does," nodded Talli. "Those troops have been destroying Lord Marak's caravans."

"I had a bad feeling about them," sighed the Nordon lord. "Will you spare my wife? Surely, she can cause no harm to you or this Lord Marak?"

"I have instructions to avoid harming anyone," smiled Cortain Talli. "If it can be avoided that is. I think you will find that Lord Marak does not believe in punishing the innocent."

The cortain made a quick signal with his fingers and the two soldiers that had accompanied him immediately left the room.

"Where are they going?" asked the lord.

"To awaken Marshal GeHert," answered Talli. "Lord Grentle, this whole process will be easier if you are willing to cooperate."

"What is it you wish me to do?" asked Lord Grentle.

"Swear Vows of Service to Lord Marak," answered Cortain Talli. "Lord Marak also demands that each person on the estate swear Vows of Service to him."

"May I rise?" asked Lord Grentle.

Talli nodded and the lord rose and padded to his window. He

gazed out upon the dozens of Torak soldiers below. He nodded as he saw that the barracks had been barricaded.

"I have little choice in this matter, Cortain," said Lord Grentle. "You have apparently overrun this small estate with surprising ease. I will swear the vows that you request of me and order my people to do the same, but I will offer you some advice before I do."

"Very well," nodded Cortain Talli as the marshal was ushered into the room. "What is your advice?"

"You obviously know that this is a Nordon estate," Lord Grentle stated. "I am sure you are also aware that Lord Patel is a member of the Lords' Council."

"I am aware of both of those facts," agreed Cortain Talli.

"Cut off with the speeches, Lord Grentle," growled Marshal GeHert. "The point is, Cortain, that you are sealing your own casket. The Nordon clan will descend upon you like an eagle swooping down on an ant. You will be lucky to see the shadow of the army that crushes you. Why don't you just mount up your men and ride over the mountains into Fakara, because there will be no place in Khadora for you to hide."

"Is that what you were going to say, Lord Grentle?" Cortain Talli asked as he tried to keep a smile off his lips.

"More or less," shrugged the Nordon lord. "I would have chosen different words, but I am sure that Marshal GeHert got his point across. The Torak clan is performing an act of war against the Nordon clan. There is little time for the Torak clan to run and hide before Lord Patel's armies arrive."

"We will discuss this some more after you have issued your vows," smiled Cortain Talli. "Perhaps over the morning meal?"

* * *

Botal was guiding the Torak squad through the night. Their route appeared to be a confusing tangle of turns on lesser trails, some not more than an animal track, and never included a main road. Katzu knew Khadora fairly well, but even he became disoriented. He was sure that they were still somewhere in the Imperial Valley, but beyond that he was not sure.

About an hour before dawn, Botal suddenly halted on the narrow trail. He held up his hand to bring the column to a stop, and then waved Lord Marak forward. Katzu followed Lord Marak to the head of the column.

"Are they ours?" asked Lord Marak.

"They are," nodded Botal. "I wanted to halt the column to make sure that our men did not overreact."

"Good thinking," nodded Lord Marak as his hand rose and his fingers moved in a signaling fashion. "Lead on, Squad Leader."

“What was that all about?” Katzu asked softly as the column moved forward.

“In a moment,” Lord Marak whispered back. “Silence for now.”

Several hundred paces farther along the trail, a Torak soldier had placed himself in the middle of the path. As Botal led the column forward, the Torak soldier pointed towards the forest on the southern side of the trail. Botal nodded and turned to the right. There was no discernible trail through the forest, but Botal picked out the easiest path through the trees. Several minutes later, the column entered a large clearing. Over a hundred Torak soldiers were camped around the clearing. Botal smiled and ordered a halt to the column.

“Now I can answer your questions, Katzu,” smiled Lord Marak as he dismounted.

“These are all Torak soldiers,” frowned Katzu. “Two cortes at least. Where have they come from?”

“They have been stationed here for some time,” Lord Marak answered vaguely.

“And where exactly is here?” inquired the mediator. “Your path through the forest has me disoriented.”

“We were in no hurry,” explained Lord Marak. “Botal’s main objective was to get here before dawn without using any main roads. While the roads are not used much at night, it is along the roads that most people live. We did not want to be seen between here and Khadoratung.”

“That explains the path of our journey,” nodded Katzu, “but not our location.”

“Follow me,” grinned Lord Marak as he headed out of the clearing to the south. “Maintain silence.”

Katzu nodded and followed Lord Marak through the forest. A short ten-minute walk brought them to the edge of a small rise. Lord Marak crouched down and signaled for Katzu to do the same. Two Torak sentries watched them approach, but said nothing. As Lord Marak reached the edge of the rise, he dropped onto his stomach and patted the ground beside him to indicate that Katzu should do the same.

“Do you recognize it?” Lord Marak asked softly.

It took only a moment for Katzu to recognize the estate. The nearly full moon illuminated the distant mansion, and the mediator shook his head in disbelief.

“That is Lord Patel’s estate,” frowned Katzu. “Surely you are not planning to attack it with only these two cortes? That would be suicide, Lord Marak.”

“Perhaps,” shrugged Lord Marak, “but I do have the right under the law. The Nordon clan viciously attacked my caravans. You have

witnessed that yourself."

"You will have no argument from me on that," agreed Katzu, "but being within the law does not shield your men from death, nor your clan from extinction. Lord Patel has a vastly superior army to yours, and the best of them reside here on his main estate. Do you have more armies coming down from Fardale?"

"Hopefully, I will only need these two cortes to accomplish my goals," Lord Marak said with a hint of nervousness in his voice. "I have spent many days planning this, Katzu. That alone does not ensure success, but I think my odds are fair enough to proceed. Would you prefer that the Torak clan merely forget the heinous act perpetrated against us by Lord Patel?"

"I would prefer a solution that does not destroy the Torak clan," Katzu shook his head. "While I cannot, and will not, play favorites between the clans, I cannot help noticing the change in the attitudes at the frontier. What was a hotbed of hatred not long ago is now a thriving area where everyone gets along well with their neighbors. I cannot help but think that you had a hand in that change somehow. Why throw it all away now?"

"The changes that were made around Fardale," declared Lord Marak, "did not just happen. The hatreds that existed were snuffed out one by one. I will admit that luck may well have played a large part, but I have also used the aggressiveness of my neighbors to my own advantage."

"I thought as much," Katzu nodded. "I have always been curious about our first meeting. The Sorgan and Litari clans filed a grievance against Fardale, but you seemed to have solved the problem before I arrived. Just what exactly happened there?"

Lord Marak was silent for several minutes. He did not doubt the honesty or patriotism of the mediator of the Lords' Council, but he wondered if he dared to expose how he had managed to solve his problems. While his methods were within the law, secrecy was paramount for the security of the Torak clan.

"I am willing to enlighten you," offered Lord Marak, "but only if you vow not to repeat what I am about to say."

"If you have acted outside the law," frowned Katzu, "I cannot make such a vow. My first oath of loyalty is to Khadora, and I am sworn to uphold the law."

"Make your vow, Katzu," smiled Lord Marak. "While my story is far from the normal conquest of Khadora, my methods have been well researched by the finest legal scholars in Khadora."

"These scholars already know about the agreements between you and the Sorgan and the Litari?" questioned Katzu.

"No," Lord Marak shook his head. "They were presented with a

hypothetical case. I used my contract with Lord Ridak as a basis for discussion, but the tenets of the law are the same."

"I will make the vow you request, Lord Marak," agreed Katzu, "but my conditions remain the same. My oath to Khadora will supercede my vows to you."

"Fair enough," declared Lord Marak. "I need for you to understand what is going to happen today with Lord Patel."

Chapter 19

Tales of Conquest

Lord Marak and Katzu, a mediator for the Lords' Council, waited for the dawn to arrive as they gazed over the main Nordon estate in the Imperial Valley.

"You know about my situation with the Situ clan, and how I came to be Lord of Fardale," Lord Marak began. "I had my hands full trying to resurrect a dying estate. There were things I could have done better, like getting to know my neighbors, but there was so much to be done and so little time. I am afraid that I neglected such things."

"Such things are never done in Khadora anyway," shrugged Katzu. "The art of negotiation has been dead in this country for many generations."

"Perhaps," shrugged Lord Marak, "but I believe in talking before fighting. In any event, Lord Quavry and Lord Burdine hatched a scheme to take Fardale away from the Situ clan. They saw in me a scapegoat that they could use to better their holdings. They filed a grievance with the Lords' Council claiming that I had violated their borders."

"Which is what brought things to my attention," nodded Katzu. "That was a very foolish move on the part of a new lord. If you had your hands full in Fardale, why did you seek to expand?"

"I didn't," answered Lord Marak. "The grievances were false."

"False?" echoed Katzu. "They would not dare to file a false grievance with the Lords' Council. Did they think I would not notice such a thing?"

"Not exactly," replied Lord Marak. "They filed the grievance and then Lord Quavry ordered his army to attack a Fardale field near my border with the Sorgan clan. It was an unused field that my freed slaves had requested to use experimentally. It was not guarded, and women and children tended it. The attack was to provoke me into attacking Watula Valley. Had I done so, you would have arrived as the Sorgan clan was destroying the remnants of my army."

"I cannot believe your tale, Lord Marak," Katzu shook his head. "While I can easily see Lord Quavry doing such a thing, his marshal, Yenga, would never attack women and children."

"Yenga did refuse," explained Lord Marak. "He was enslaved for his refusal. Lord Quavry's cousin took over control of the army."

"Very well," Katzu said. "You indicate that you did not attack in

retribution. How then did you solve your dilemma?"

"Actually, I did attack," grinned Lord Marak. "My armies remained in Fardale, but I went at night and managed to gain access to Lord Quavry's suite."

"Alone?" gasped Katzu. "You went alone into the Sorgan mansion?"

"It was the only solution I could find that would avoid bloodshed," answered Lord Marak. "If my armies did not attack him, Lord Quavry would have sent his forces to destroy Fardale. My only option was to force Lord Quavry to alter his plans."

"That is bold, Lord Marak," Katzu shook his head in wonder. "If you had been captured, Fardale would have been his without a fight."

"Quite true," agreed Lord Marak. "As it turned out, Watula Valley became mine without a fight. I liked that solution much better."

"Wait," frowned the mediator. "What do you mean by saying that Watula Valley became yours? The Sorgan clan still holds Watula Valley to this day. You are losing me."

"Lord Quavry was in a terrible bind when I captured him," smiled Lord Marak. "With a Lords' Council mediator due to arrive, he was in no position to order an attack on Fardale. His false filing would become obvious. I should add that I gave him little choice in the matter. I demanded that he swear Vows of Service to me."

"His other choices were death or enslavement," nodded Katzu, "but a lord swearing allegiance to another lord? While that is not unheard of, it usually results in the dissolution of the clan. The Sorgan clan exists to this day."

"Usually is the keyword," grinned Lord Marak. "I did not want to destroy the Sorgan clan. The truth is, I wanted a happy and healthy neighbor for Fardale. I made demands of the Sorgan clan. Every person of the Sorgan clan had to personally swear Vows of Service to me. All slaves were set free, and a few other modifications as to how the estate was run, including showing respect for all people."

"And Lord Quavry agreed to this?" asked Katzu.

"He did," nodded Lord Marak. "He really had no choice. His life was forfeit, and his son and cousin had been killed. He had no family left to take his place. My demands were reasonable. In fact, the Sorgan clan is far better off today than they were at that time."

"I agree," smiled Katzu. "What about the Litari?"

"After I received the vows from the Sorgan," continued Lord Marak, "Lord Quavry invited Lord Burdine to Watula Valley. Quavry and I presented our case to the lord of the Litari. Burdine also understood that he had no choice. Lord Quavry would be compelled to give evidence against him when you arrived. He quickly agreed to the same terms."

“So when I arrived,” chuckled Katzu, “you already controlled all of the parties of the dispute. Small wonder you were happy not to have me involved.”

“It does not end there,” said Lord Marak. “Fardale’s last neighbor, the Ragatha, saw my agreement in Watula Valley as a sign of weakness. While they had no idea what happened in the discussions, they were quite sure that I had been forced to give up something valuable to achieve peace. Using an old contract dispute as a basis for conflict, Lord Zawbry of Woodville requested that the Ragatha clan amass for an attack and wipe me out. To make matters worse, Lord Marshal Grefon of the Situ clan promised that they would not make a move to protect me.”

“Did you also sneak into their estate and capture him?” asked the mediator.

“The conflict with the Ragatha was not bloodless,” frowned Lord Marak. “While we managed to keep the losses to a minimum, many a man died that day. Lord Sevrin was surprised, though. He could not understand why the Sorgan and Litari clans were aligned against him.”

“Because he was unaware of your secret alliances,” nodded Katzu. “Very clever, Lord Marak. That is how you managed to obtain Woodville from them?”

“Yes,” answered Lord Marak, “but Woodville is not all I got out of the conflict. The Ragatha clan is also sworn to me.”

“Blessed Khadora!” gasped Katzu. “The Ragatha clan is an old clan and well respected. While not as powerful as the clans of the Imperial Valley, their position on things is often noted.”

“I also control the Situ clan,” added Lord Marak. “After your mediation in Lituk Valley, Lord Ridak sent all of his forces to Fardale to crush me. He was not happy with your ruling.”

“Lord Ridak requested the mediation,” frowned Katzu. “To then act against it is a foul deed. Suddenly, Lord Marak, the peace I have noticed in your area of the frontier becomes quite understandable. You control all of the clans there.”

“To a degree,” shrugged Lord Marak. “I have retained each clan’s identity. I believe this is important to Khadora. Each of my clans has prospered under my edicts. None of them have slaves, and yet they are all more profitable than before.”

“You may have a hard time selling that issue to the Lords’ Council,” sighed Katzu, “but you have made a believer out of me. Tell me that you are not planning to go alone to capture Lord Patel.”

“I would if I thought I would succeed,” frowned Lord Marak, “but that is not possible. Lord Patel has hundreds of his best-trained troops at this estate. I am not so foolish that I imagine I could beat such

troops."

"Then why are you here?" inquired Katzu.

"I expect his troops to leave," grinned Lord Marak. "You are aware that Lord Marshal Orik based the ambushers at his Deep Bend estate?"

"Yes," nodded Katzu.

"Torak troops have seized that estate," announced Lord Marak. "Lord Patel will learn of this around midday today."

"You have declared war on a member of the Lords' Council," sighed the mediator. "He will crush you with everything he has."

"That is exactly the reaction that I expect," grinned Lord Marak. "His best troops will ride out of here before dusk. Tonight Lord Patel will be captured by the Torak clan."

"You are mad," scowled Katzu. "The Nordon clan has large armies at many of his estates. Even if he sends the troops from this estate, he will bring troops here from his other estates to protect him. Your plan cannot succeed. Meanwhile your people in Deep Bend are being set out as a sacrifice. They will be destroyed for sure."

"You may be right," responded Lord Marak, "but I hope not. Every lord surrounds himself with his best troops. Lord Patel is no different. If he seeks to eradicate the Torak clan, he will use these troops. The question appears to be the timing of events. I have arranged for him to receive word of the attack at Deep Bend at midday for a reason."

"What do you think he will do, Lord Marak?" asked the mediator. "Tell me what you see Lord Patel doing when he gets word of your attack at Deep Bend."

"The first thing he will do," Lord Marak replied, "is order Lord Marshal Orik to ready his men. He will also try to determine my whereabouts. He will not waste troops just to retake Deep Bend without continuing onward to eradicate the Torak clan. He will find out that I am no longer in the capital."

"This is why you left in the middle of the night?" asked Katzu.

"Exactly," nodded Lord Marak. "Lord Patel was most curious as to my date of departure from Khadoratung. I suspect that he planned to assassinate me on my journey home. So I wanted to get out of the city without alerting his spies, but I also want him to know that I left the city on the day that I did. He will inquire to determine if I am still in the Imperial Palace and learn that I left a while ago."

"You want him to think that you are in Deep Bend?" questioned the mediator.

"Yes," nodded Lord Marak. "I had an Imperial guard sent to watch me everyday. He will have noted the day I turned up absent, although he would have no reason to alert anyone other than Marshal

Chack. Lord Patel's spies would have missed me leaving, but inquiries will reveal when I left."

"Clever," nodded Katzu. "What will he do next?"

"He will see the need for protection here," admitted Lord Marak. "He will order troops from another estate to report here to replace the men he will be sending to Deep Bend."

"Without a doubt," agreed Katzu, "and that is where your plan fails."

"I don't think so," grinned Lord Marak. "I suspect that Lord Marshal Orik will see the opportunity to get a good half-day's march in before dusk. He will order his troops to depart as soon as they are ready. The replacement troops from his nearest estate are over a half-day's ride. I suspect that they will not ride through the night to get here, so they will not arrive until tomorrow morning."

"Giving you the window of opportunity that you need," nodded Katzu. "What if you are wrong? What if the replacement troops ride through the night?"

"Then we shall attack them instead," frowned Lord Marak. "I would prefer not to do that, but I would have to."

"Attack them?" Katzu shook his head. "There are likely to be six to eight cortes of replacement troops coming here. You have two cortes. You can't be serious about attacking them? How will you even know if they are coming?"

"Oh, I will know if they are coming," smiled Lord Marak as he thought about StarWind's assignment. The Sakovan would not only provide advanced notice of Nordon troop movements, she was quite capable of delaying them by destroying bridges or blocking roads. "As for the odds in battle, my men are trained to fight at night. Do you think those replacement troops are?"

"Probably not," Katzu conceded, "but the odds are still long. Alright assuming that you can get to Lord Patel, that still leaves you sacrificing your two cortes at Deep Bend. You say that your people are precious to you. Are you so quick to have them destroyed?"

"I hope to have the attacking troops recalled by Lord Patel," answered Lord Marak, "but I am prepared for a battle at Deep Bend if it is necessary."

"Prepared for a battle?" retorted the mediator. "How do you prepare two cortes to face the bulk of Lord Patel's army? He will have at least a dozen cortes attacking."

"And I will have ten cortes defending," smiled Lord Marak. "The odds are not so slanted."

"Ten cortes?" echoed Katzu. "Where will you get ten cortes from?"

"How quickly you forget," grinned Lord Marak. "The Assembly of

Lords is over, and everyone is on their way home. The Situ, Ragatha, Sorgan, and Litari clans are traveling with two cortes each. They will be near Deep Bend at the very time that Lord Patel's troops arrive."

Katzu's jaw dropped as Lord Marak's words sunk in. "You have planned this well, Lord Marak," he said. "The Nordon will not even suspect that the other clans owe their allegiance to you. Just the confusion alone during the battle will cost Lord Patel a great number of men. They will not understand what they are up against."

"The problem is," Lord Marak sighed, "I do not wish to kill a great number of Nordon. I would prefer to end this with as little bloodshed as possible."

"Agreed," nodded Katzu. "Do you plan to offer Lord Patel the same deal that was extended to your other clans?"

"I do," declared Lord Marak. "That is why it is essential to have you here. Lord Patel will not be easily intimidated. If he thinks he can use the Lords' Council to invalidate his vows to me, there will be unnecessary deaths."

"Meaning you will have to kill Lord Patel?" questioned the mediator.

"I would have little choice," Lord Marak frowned as he nodded. "I would have to destroy the Nordon clan. If he knows that you are a witness to his transgressions, though, I believe that he will accept his fate."

"I hope you are right, Lord Marak," Katzu responded. "The Nordon are a founding clan of Khadora. I also see a problem with you controlling two seats on the Lords' Council. Do you think that is fair?"

"Is it any different than the alliances that exist today?" countered the Torak lord. "While those alliances may not be bound by Vows of Service, they are just as strong. This will be no different."

"You make a good case," Katzu stated after a moment of hesitation. "There are many different levels of alliance with the Imperial Palace, and Lords' Council members come and go. You may control two seats after this event, but that is not guaranteed to last."

"I will not use Lord Patel to do anything that is not in the best interests of Khadora," Lord Marak promised. "You will not get that vow from any other members of the Lords' Council."

"You are correct about that," Katzu said as he pictured the Lords' Council members. "At least you are trying to solve your problems through negotiations. I do think that you have a future as a mediator."

"How did you become a mediator, Katzu?" asked Lord Marak.

"That is a long story," frowned Katzu. "My father was the lord of a founding clan. I grew up with all of the education and privileges that such a founding lord's family was afforded, but I grew disenchanted with the way disputes were solved. Nobody appeared

willing to talk about their problems. The first avenue in a dispute was always warfare. My father was no exception, although I knew him to be a kind man. I began to realize that it was not my father's fault that he acted as he did. It was the culture that we lived in. I wanted so much to change that culture."

"Were you first in line for the lordship?" asked Lord Marak.

"I was," nodded Katzu, "but I know what you are thinking. You think that once I became the lord of a powerful clan, that I could affect changes by negotiating my own conflicts. I thought that for a while, too, but I soon realized that was mere folly. It takes two to negotiate, and other lords only recognized force."

"So what did you do?" asked the Torak lord.

"When my father became a member of the Lords' Council," continued Katzu, "I got to see how it operated. I learned about the mediators and what they did. I made my mind up then that the greatest thing that I could do in my short life was to become the best mediator that Khadora had ever seen."

"I believe most lords would agree that you have obtained your goal," smiled Lord Marak. "Your words are never disputed."

"No, they aren't," agreed Katzu, "but as with Lord Ridak, there are times when my rulings are ignored. You cannot believe how much that bothers me."

"I believe that I can," offered Lord Marak. "Like you, I look forward to the day when all Khadorans will act as brothers instead of scrambling to take advantage of each other." Lord Marak sighed. "Perhaps we should get some sleep while we can. It is going to be a long day and a longer night."

* * *

It was dark when Gunta woke Lord Marak. The Torak lord rose and gazed up at the sky. Clouds had moved in, and Marak nodded with satisfaction. He had been worried about the light of the moon giving the Nordon troops an advantage.

"Why was I not woken at midday?" asked Lord Marak

"There was no reason to disturb your slumber," answered Gunta. "Lord Patel has received your message. Almost all of his forces left shortly after midday. I estimate that there are only two cortes guarding the estate. I figured that this night is going to be quite tiring for you, and you will not get rest come morning, either."

"What about the reinforcements from the other estates?" asked the Torak lord.

"They were thinking of riding through the night," replied Gunta, "but StarWind discouraged them. She did not elaborate. They will not arrive before morning."

"Excellent," smiled Lord Marak. "What is the status of the two

cortes?"

"One corte has gone to barracks," reported Gunta. "Of the other corte, two squads are at the front of the mansion, and one is patrolling. They are not Lord Patel's best troops. Their patrols are sloppy, and the men appear to sense no danger. I suspect that most of the second corte will retire soon."

"That is the problem with only training a select group of your army," Lord Marak shook his head. "There are times when they are needed in more than one place. When are we due to move out?"

"On your orders," replied Gunta. "We could wait a couple of more hours, but I think that decision is best made by you."

"Send Botal, Mistake, and Katzu to me," ordered Lord Marak. "I want to grab a bite to eat before we leave."

Gunta nodded and ran off into the dark. Lord Marak grabbed some dried meat and a chunk of bread and sat on a log. Within moments Gunta returned with the people he had been sent for.

"We will be moving out shortly, Botal," Lord Marak stated. "I want one corte to leave immediately and make their way around to the front of the estate. They are to remain hidden unless they hear the sounds of battle. Send Latril with them."

Botal nodded and disappeared to give the orders to the Torak soldiers.

"Why do you send the woman with the troops?" asked Katzu.

Lord Marak ignored the question. He did not want to explain his means of communicating to anyone just yet.

"Mistake," Lord Marak continued, "I want you by my side at all times. When I signal you, you are to use a tyrik dart on the person I point to. Remember, speed is not important here. Silence is."

"I understand," Mistake said with an edge of excitement in her voice.

"Katzu, I mean for you to remain safe and removed from battle at all times," declared Lord Marak. "It might be best if you accompanied the corte leaving now. They will not be called to battle unless things go wrong. If that happens, you can remain safely outside the estate."

"I would prefer to follow you," Katzu said. "This mediation is already rather irregular. I do not think how I enter the estate is of any importance."

"Alright," frowned Lord Marak, "but I do not wish to enter into the mediation phase right away. I will ask you to remain outside Lord Patel's presence until I call for you."

"That is most unusual," frowned the mediator. "May I ask why?"

"Because your appearance will unsettle Lord Patel," answered the Torak lord. "I prefer that he have some feel for his situation before the gravity of it sets in. I suspect that he will reveal to me just how he

intends to invalidate my victory. That knowledge can save lives."

"Then I shall comply," nodded Katzu. "I will remain outside Lord Patel's presence until I am requested."

Botal returned and Lord Marak said, "Our second corte is to secure the barracks and keep those in front of the mansion from coming to the rear. Your squad will be coming with me, Botal. We will take out the roving patrol if it is in the rear of the estate. We will enter the mansion from the rear. I want your men to pay particular attention to the safety of Katzu and Mistake."

"As well as you," Botal retorted. "I will issue the orders and return."

Botal disappeared again as Lord Marak checked his weapons. Mistake readied her blowpipe, and the Lords' Council mediator watched with interest.

"What is that?" he asked Mistake.

Mistake looked to Lord Marak for guidance and the Torak lord smiled. "It is a blowpipe," he said. "Mistake will use darts loaded with tyrik poison to incapacitate certain obstacles. The tyrik poison will induce an instant paralysis. It has no long lasting effects, but whoever is struck by one will be out of the battle for around three hours."

"Tyrik poison?" questioned Katzu. "I have never heard of such a thing. What is it?"

"An animal poison from Fakara," answered Mistake.

"You are Fakaran?" inquired Katzu. "How is it that you are here with Lord Marak?"

"She is Fakaran," interrupted Lord Marak. "Mistake just happens to be here looking for trade opportunities in Khadoratung. I have known her for a while, and she has agreed to help me with this problem. I would be willing to discuss this further with you, Katzu, but this is not the time for it. For now, let's just say that with her help, less Nordon clansmen will need to die. I would prefer to poison them for a short while rather than kill them."

Katzu nodded although it was clear that his curiosity had not been satisfied. "I am pleased that you take the killing of other Khadorans seriously, Lord Marak. Your attitude gives me hope of seeing an end to the senseless bloodshed that infects our society."

"Our goals are the same, Katzu," smiled Lord Marak. "I look forward to the end of this particular matter so that we might sit down together and discuss the future of our country. There are dark clouds on our horizon. The squabbling that occurs now among us will be nothing compared to that which is coming."

Chapter 20

Mediation

Botal's squad hid in the rows of tall corn waiting for the Nordon patrol to pass by. Lord Marak shook his head in dismay when the patrol reached the end of the mansion and turned around. He waited patiently as the Nordon squad marched to the far corner of the rear of the mansion and again turned around.

"They are only patrolling the rear of the mansion," Lord Marak scowled. "It is as if they know which way we will approach from."

"They are not even aware that we are here," soothed Botal. "I will admit, however, that I have never seen such a patrol before. I wonder what they are up to?"

"We could take them all out at once," suggested Gunta. "Each of us can choose a number. The far side of the patrol will be odd and the near side even."

"Could you really be assured of killing them all at the same time?" asked Katzu. "That sounds like you would need a fair amount of luck."

"No," sighed Lord Marak. "This squad can do it. I simply do not wish to kill twenty men for no good reason. Mistake, find out what is going on out in front of the mansion."

A puzzled frown fell over the mediator's face, but Mistake moved back through the cornfield without comment. She only went as far as necessary to ensure that the mediator did not hear any of the conversation. She wove an air tunnel to where she thought the mage attached to the two cortes would be. As she called softly into the air tunnel, she wavered it slightly to cover a larger area.

"Kaylee," Mistake called softly. "Can you hear me?"

When she received no response, Mistake tried a slightly different area. It took her nearly ten minutes to make contact.

"Mistake?" said a soft melodic voice. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Kaylee," whispered Mistake. "There is a patrol constantly guarding the rear of the estate. Do you know why?"

A few moments of silence passed before Kaylee answered. "There are two squads sitting on the front porch," she explained. "I guess the rear is the only place that needs patrolling."

"Are the barracks secure?" questioned Mistake.

"Oh yes," replied Kaylee. "We have been waiting for the two squads to move before attacking them. At this distance, a lot of noise

would be made. The mansion would be alerted to our attack."

Mistake was about to drop the air tunnel and crawl back to Lord Marak for instructions when he suddenly appeared alongside her.

"Trouble?" he asked.

Mistake informed him of the conversation she had just had with Kaylee. Lord Marak frowned thoughtfully for a moment and then nodded to himself.

"Make another air tunnel to Latril," instructed Lord Marak.

Mistake nodded and created a second air tunnel.

"Latril?" Lord Marak asked softly.

"Yes, Lord Marak," answered the mage.

"I want someone to make a noise on the road," instructed Lord Marak. "Don't do it right now. Listen first."

"Go ahead," prompted Latril.

"The Nordon corte here is static," explained Lord Marak. "We cannot approach the mansion without a battle. I want someone out there to make a noise just loud enough that it will need to be investigated. Do you understand?"

"We understand," Latril responded after a short pause. "When do you want it?"

"Kaylee," Lord Marak said, "we are going to draw those troops away from the mansion. I suspect the patrol in the rear will come around to the front. I want them taken out and the bodies hidden as quickly as possible. Capture and immobilize them if possible, but they must be neutralized. Then move towards the front of the estate and capture the other two squads. Coordinate this with Latril."

"We understand what you want," Kaylee responded. "They say it will take a few minutes to get organized. Is that all right?"

"That is fine," agreed Lord Marak. "Just make it as silent as possible."

Lord Marak turned and crawled away. Mistake dropped the two air tunnels and followed.

"This squad should be leaving in a short while," Lord Marak reported. "We move as soon as they disappear."

Botal's squad waited in silence. About five minutes later, a shrill whistle rent the air. The squad stopped in their tracks. The squad leader pointed towards the nearest corner of the mansion and the squad marched towards it. They did not appear to be in any hurry, but they did not dally either. As soon as they rounded the corner, Botal's men sprinted for the rear of the mansion. As Lord Marak, Mistake, and Katzu reached the rear door, Botal had already tried to open it.

"No go," reported Botal. "They actually lock the doors here."

"Must be a rough neighborhood," Lord Marak quipped as his eyes rose to look at the second level. He saw a window above and turned to

Mistake. “Can you climb?” he asked.

“I can climb,” Mistake shook her head, “but why should I? Just because a door is locked does not mean that we can’t enter through it.”

The Fakaran thief pulled a thin strip of metal from inside her belt. Botal stepped away from the door as Mistake inserted the strip into the lock. She grinned with satisfaction as a loud click was heard. Katzu’s eyebrows rose as Mistake opened the door.

Lord Marak’s chuckle was barely audible as he signaled for Botal to enter the mansion. The squad slid into the mansion and closed the door. They stood silently in the unlit room as their eyes adjusted to the dark confines. Botal moved forward and cracked the door leading into the corridor. He moved cautiously along the corridor to the foot of the stairs. As the rest of the squad approached, Botal used hand signals to disperse them. He sent two men to guard the front door and two to guard the rear door. Four more were assigned to search the rooms on the ground floor. Two men were assigned to guard the staircase while the rest of the squad proceeded up the stairs.

As they reached the top of the stairs, shouting came from outside the mansion. Clashes of steel clanged in the still night and shouts were heard inside the mansion. Lord Marak’s eyes scanned the second floor corridor and guessed that the lord’s suite was at the end of the corridor. He sprinted towards the door with Gunta and Halman at his heels.

Botal stood at the top of the stairs as he directed the rest of his men. He split them up to cover as many rooms as possible at the same time. Mistake and Katzu hurried after Lord Marak. They had almost caught up when a door opened and a man ran into the corridor. Mistake was prepared and she did not hesitate. The blowpipe came up to her mouth and she blew the dart into the man. He collapsed against the wall as Mistake ran past him.

Lord Marak barged through the lord’s suite and into his bedroom. Lord Patel was already out of bed and grabbing for his sword. Lord Marak leaped across the space between them and pushed the Nordon lord away from the table. Gunta dove through the air and wrapped his arms around Lord Patel’s legs, while Halman pulled his sword and scanned the room for people. The lord’s wife was in bed. She sat up and stared at the black-suited invaders. Her eyes grew large, as she understood what was happening, but she didn’t utter a sound.

Lord Patel tried to free his legs from Gunta’s hold, but the Torak soldier refused to let go. Lord Marak took Lord Patel’s sword from the table and threw it into the corner. He turned to look at the door to the corridor and saw Mistake and Katzu just beyond the door. He walked casually to the door and closed it partially to hide them from Lord

Patel's view.

"Let him up, Gunta," Lord Marak said.

Gunta released the lord's legs and swiftly rolled away before he could be kicked. Lord Patel rose and brushed his nightclothes as if they were dirty.

"How dare you break into my home?" Lord Patel spat. "You are nothing more than a common criminal. I shall see you hanged for this."

"We see things slightly differently, Lord Patel," replied the Torak lord. "Your men were the ones wearing the gray uniforms."

"What are you talking about?" scowled Lord Patel. "Are you mad?"

There was a noisy commotion in the hallway. Gunta immediately moved to check it out. He returned a moment later with Lord Marshal Orik. He shoved Orik into the room.

"He did not lead his men into battle," Gunta said as Orik caught his footing and turned to glare at Lord Marak.

"Halman, take the lady away from here," ordered Lord Marak. "See that she is cared for, but she is to speak to no one."

Lord Patel's face turned red, and he started towards Lord Marak. The Torak lord smoothly pulled his sword free from leather and held it to the Nordon lord's chest.

"You, sir, are remaining here to chat with me," declared Lord Marak. "Your wife will not be harmed."

"What are you doing here?" asked Lord Marshal Orik. "You are supposed to be…"

"In Deep Bend?" Lord Marak finished the question. "Perhaps that is where I am supposed to be, but clearly I am not."

"Then the messages were false?" questioned Orik.

"No," Lord Marak shook his head. "The messages were correct. My troops have seized the Nordon estate at Deep Bend."

"That is an act of war!" the Lord Marshal said accusingly. "Are you insane?"

"Hardly," replied Lord Marak. "Nor am I a fool, in case that was your next question. The Nordon clan repetitively attacked my caravans in an attempt to destroy me. The troops used, which were wearing gray by the way, were yours Lord Marshal, but they were housed at Deep Bend. Do you deny this?"

"I do not have to answer your questions," spat Orik.

"Quite true," nodded Lord Marak as he turned his attention to the Nordon lord, "but you do, Lord Patel. Do you deny my accusations?"

"You are stark raving mad, Marak," scowled Lord Patel. "You have attacked a member of the Lords' Council. Not only have you attacked my estate at Deep Bend, but you have also entered my very

home and accosted me. You have done all of this without provocation. You shall hang in the morning."

"Without provocation?" taunted Lord Marak. "How dare you say such a thing?"

"Lord Marak," Lord Marshal Orik said softly, "I am not sure how you and your squad managed to get into this mansion, but you should be preparing to die, not harassing my lord. Take what time you have left and flee for your life. Maybe you can escape to Fakara."

The door opened and Squad Leader Botal entered. "The estate is secure, Lord Marak," he stated. "There were unfortunately six deaths."

"Bury them," ordered Lord Marak.

"I shall find out if they have families first and let the wives attend to them before burial," Botal nodded before he exited the room.

"Secured the estate?" howled Orik. "What nonsense is this? Do you play me for some type of fool? And he makes like you only lost six men? Preposterous!"

"You need to listen more closely, Orik," chided Lord Marak. "My men do not travel with their wives. The six deaths were Nordon casualties."

"Do you really expect us to believe that your squad defeated our defenses?" Lord Patel said.

"Certainly not," answered Lord Marak. "I never said that I came with only a squad. That is merely what your spies tell you I am traveling with. I came with two cortes. And if you are expecting your reinforcements to arrive tonight, I have more bad news for you. They have been delayed. They will arrive in the morning."

"So you will live just a little while longer," shrugged Lord Patel.

"Then I shall spend my time amusing myself," smiled Lord Marak. "I will have answers out of you, Lord Patel, or I will kill you. It will not take me until morning to decide whether you live or die. Answer my questions truthfully or you will die. Why did you have your troops attack my caravans?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," lied Lord Patel. "I think you have lost your mind."

"Tsk, tsk," taunted Lord Marak. "A member of the Lords' Council telling a bold faced lie. How unbecoming. You should be aware that your last attack failed. The ambushers are dead with the exception of two prisoners."

"Prisoners?" echoed Lord Marshal Orik. "You are lying."

"Am I?" retorted Lord Marak. "How then did I know that you were using Deep Bend to attack me from? How did I know that the troops were yours, Lord Marshal? How did I discover that Lord Patel was present when they received their orders?"

Lord Marshal Orik's face clouded with concern, but Lord Patel

laughed.

"This is the story that you are going to tell the Lords' Council?" countered Lord Patel. "Some gray warriors attacked your caravans and said that they were my people? That is your excuse for attacking Deep Bend? You have much to learn about politics, Lord Marak. When it comes to your word against mine, yours doesn't count."

"So you admit trying to ruin me?" asked Lord Marak. "You see my only problem as proving your treachery? Is that it?"

"Isn't that enough, Lord Marak?" countered Lord Patel "You have no one but yourself to blame. You are the one who is stirring things up with your calls to abandon our slaves. Did you really expect that we would stand by and let you ruin this country?"

"Lord Patel…" interrupted Lord Marshal Orik.

"You just don't understand the nature of power, Lord Marak," Lord Patel continued. "The people who rule Khadora will never stand for your kind. If I hadn't attacked you, someone else would have. It really doesn't matter which one of us gets to you first."

"Lord Patel…" interrupted Lord Marshal Orik.

"Your kind come and go, Lord Marak," Lord Patel said. "And you are always indignant about it. You just don't understand. We live because we have slaves. Without them, we would perish."

"Did you authorize the attacks on my caravans?" Lord Marak loudly asked.

"Yes," shouted Lord Patel. "Yes, I ordered your precious caravans attacked. I ordered your men to be killed and the wagons burned. Now you know the truth, Marak. What are you going to do about it?"

"I am here to demand restitution," declared Lord Marak.

"For the Torak clan?' laughed Lord Patel. "There is no Torak clan, you fool. My armies are headed for Deep Bend as we speak. When they have finished there, they will attack River's Bend, and then Fardale and Woodville. And for fun on their way home, I have authorized them to destroy Raven's Point. It is over, Lord Marak. You and your men here are all that is left of the Torak clan. If you run now, maybe you will survive, but I doubt it."

"I have a different solution in mind," Lord Marak said threateningly. "You will swear Vows of Service to me, and recall your armies."

"You are mad," scowled Lord Patel. "Why would I ever do such a thing?"

"To live," Lord Marak replied. "If you refuse, I will have little option but to kill you and everyone on this estate. Then I will burn it to the ground to mark the end of the Nordon clan."

"You wouldn't dare!" shouted Lord Patel. "You would be hunted down and killed by every clan in Khadora."

“I don’t think so,” smiled Lord Marak. “If it is just my word against yours, and you are dead, I suspect the Lords’ Council might believe my version of events.”

“They would not believe you even then,” snapped Lord Patel. “There is no love for you on the Lords’ Council. I am not the only member seeking to kill you. They will never believe your word.”

“Then I shall have to present my other witness,” grinned Lord Marak. “A witness that they will believe. He will detail your treachery for everyone to see. The name Nordon will be infamous. Perhaps I should even let you live to witness it. The humiliation will make you wish you were dead.”

“What other witness?” asked Lord Patel.

Lord Marak snapped his fingers, and Gunta went to the door. He opened it and signaled. The Lords’ Council mediator stepped into the room.

“Katzu?” questioned Lord Patel. “What are you doing here?”

“I was requested to mediate a dispute between the Nordon and the Torak clans,” answered Katzu.

“Are you also a witness?” Lord Marshal Orik asked in an unsteady voice.

“I am, Lord Marshal,” frowned Katzu. “I had the misfortune of stumbling upon a certain caravan ambush.”

“And you heard what has been said in this room?” Orik inquired.

“I have been outside waiting to be called in,” nodded Katzu. “I am afraid that I heard more than I ever cared to hear.”

Tears welled up in Lord Patel’s eyes as he avoided Katzu’s gaze. He stared at the floor in front of his feet and shook his head.

“Mediator,” he said, his voice cracking, “will you please wait outside while I discuss terms with Lord Marak.”

“As you wish,” nodded Katzu as he turned and left the room.

“You could have spared me that, Lord Marak,” Lord Patel said softly. “You had the right to kill me or my men for what I did to you, but to damn the Nordon name for all time is beyond revenge. I offer you my life as restitution. Kill me and take Deep Bend for your own, but I beg of you to keep the Lords’ Council out of this affair.”

“Deep Bend is already mine,” Lord Marak stated.

“It won’t be tomorrow,” interrupted Lord Marshal Orik. “Practically my whole army is bearing down on it.”

Lord Marak ignored the marshal. “Lord Patel,” he said, “my demands are not onerous on you. I ask you and all of your people to offer Vows of Service to me. I will demand that you free your slaves, and that you treat your people with respect.”

“Vows of Service?” echoed Lord Patel. “I cannot do that. The one thing that must survive this foolish thing I have done is the Nordon

clan. I cannot offer you Vows of Service. I will not let this clan be taken over by the Toraks."

"Let me try this again," smiled Lord Marak. "I do not intend to dissolve the Nordon clan. I do not intend to replace you as lord of the Nordon clan. I do not plan to take away your seat on the Lords' Council. The vows will be made to me and will be irreversible, but they will also be secret. No one outside our clans need know what has happened here tonight."

"What?" asked Lord Patel. "How can you do such a thing?"

"Is it legal?" asked Lord Marshal Orik.

"It is quite legal," nodded Lord Marak. "Would you be surprised to know that I already have this arrangement with four other clans?"

"Which four?" asked Lord Patel.

"The Situ, Sorgan, Ragatha, and Litari," answered Lord Marak. "Each and every member of those four clans have sworn Vows of Service to me."

"Yet they all act independent," frowned Lord Patel. "How can this be?"

"They are fairly independent," shrugged Lord Marak. "Each of those clans has attacked me and lost. I made the same offer to each, and each has been pleased with the results. They are more prosperous than ever. Only Lord Quavry was dissatisfied."

"How did you find out about him?" asked Lord Patel.

"The Sorgan informed me," replied Lord Marak.

"So they truly value their vows to you then," remarked Orik.

"You make it seem so workable, Lord Marak," sighed Lord Patel. "You make it sound like the Nordon will do well, but we are patriots. Your reforms make me sick to my stomach. I do not think I could live with them."

"I assure you that you can, Lord Patel," countered Lord Marak. "The other lords felt the same as you, but they were pleasantly surprised by the results."

"I suppose you will demand my vote on the Lords' Council to end slavery," scowled Lord Patel.

"Not until you believe I am right," promised Lord Marak. "Besides, we have more urgent matters to attend to than slavery right now."

"Like what?" questioned Lord Patel.

"There are clans in Khadora who are planning to spread chaos," explained Lord Marak. "I know who these clans are, but there is nothing that we can do to stop them right now. The addition of your Nordon armies will help."

"With the five clans you already hold," frowned Lord Marshal Orik, "why would you need the might of the Nordon?"

“Because even the Nordon are small in comparison to our enemy,” answered Lord Marak.

“Small?” blustered Lord Patel. “I have twelve cortes on their way to Deep Bend right now, and another two dozen that will be leaving tomorrow to finish off the Torak clan. Who are these powerful lords?”

Lord Marak winced at the mention of the two dozen additional cortes. He had made a grave miscalculation. He had assumed that the other Nordon estates would remain defensive.

“The Vessi, Glamaraldi, and Lejune clans are hosting Jiadin warriors,” declared Lord Marak. “Their purpose is not yet clear, but I believe they plan to take over as much of Khadora as possible.”

“Bah,” scowled Lord Patel. “Those three clans put together would not even keep my armies busy. You are making something out of nothing.”

“How many Jiadin?” asked Lord Marshal Orik.

“Around eighty cortes,” Lord Marak replied.

“Eighty cortes?” gasped Orik. “That is a very large army.”

“Each,” added Lord Marak.

“Blessed Khadora!” swore Lord Patel. “It will take more than us joining together to confront that. We must inform the Lords’ Council.”

Lord Patel halted as he heard his own words. He sighed heavily and sat down on the bed.

“Are you well, Lord Patel?” asked Lord Marak.

“Well enough to see what a fool I have been, Lord Marak,” sighed Lord Patel. “I have let my ego get the better of me. Bring in the mediator and let him hear the details of our agreement.”

“Secrecy is a part of our agreement,” frowned Lord Marak.

“I know, I know,” nodded Lord Patel. “The only way to ensure secrecy with a mediator involved is to make him vow secrecy as part of the settlement. Bring him in.”

Lord Marak nodded and Gunta went and returned with Katzu.

“Katzu,” began Lord Patel, “Lord Marak and I have reached an agreement. We want you to bind that agreement and swear an oath of secrecy regarding the details. Will you do it?”

“If the agreement is accepted freely by both parties,” nodded Katzu. “It must also be a legal settlement.”

“It is,” sighed Lord Patel. “Before we explain it, Katzu, I want to apologize to you personally, and to the Lords’ Council via you, although they will never learn of it. My behavior has not been befitting a member of the Lords’ Council. I hope you will forgive me and not think poorly of the Nordon clan because of my errors.”

“If your apology is sincere,” smiled Katzu, “then I will have little choice but to forgive you. A great Khadora is what we all seek. Sometimes we are blinded as to which path we should take to get

there.”

Lord Patel smiled at the mediator as Lord Marak explained the agreement. Lord Patel and Lord Marshal Orik gave their Vows of Service.

“Now you must have your troops recalled, Lord Marshal,” stated Lord Marak. “We have avoided bloodshed here, it must not be allowed to occur elsewhere.”

“I hope we are not too late,” frowned Orik. “My twelve cortes had vowed to press on through the night. I fear what may happen to the two cortes of Torak troops.”

“Fear also for the Nordon troops,” retorted Lord Marak. “I told you of my other clans. They have eight cortes near Deep Bend right now. They are waiting for the Nordon attack.”

“Mercy!” swore Orik. “You are a devilish foe. I will get a rider out immediately.”

“Get his vows first, Lord Marak,” warned Lord Patel. “Nobody should leave this estate without giving his vows first.”

“A good point,” nodded Lord Marak. “We must also schedule trips to your other estates to make sure that all of the Nordon swear. No word of this agreement must reach the ears of other clans.”

“None whatsoever,” agreed Lord Patel. “I can suffer my role under you as long as everyone else is ignorant of it.”

“I think you will grow to like it,” grinned Lord Marak.

Chapter 21

Valley of the Ram

HawkShadow stood unmoving in the dark forest as the legions of Nordon soldiers rode by. His hand eased the bowstring back as he took aim at one of the men at the rear of the column. It was a much greater distance than HawkShadow would use for an assassination, but he did not care if his arrow killed anyone. Wounding a Nordon at this point was as good as killing one. His task was to create havoc and stall the Nordon march to Deep Bend.

While the arrow was still on its way towards the Nordon column, HawkShadow nocked another arrow and released the bowstring. A scream erupted from the rear of the column as HawkShadow let fly his third arrow.

Without waiting to see the effects of his attack, the Sakovan assassin turned and ran through the dark mass of trees. His feet moved mechanically over the memorized terrain as his path zigzagged towards the river gorge. Already he could hear the galloping of hooves behind him as the Nordon troops reacted to the attack. HawkShadow panted heavily as he raced away from the mounted column, the sounds of his pursuers coming closer at an alarming rate. HawkShadow wondered if he had cut this one too close.

As sweat soaked his body, HawkShadow leaped into the air and grabbed onto a low branch of a large tree. He pulled himself up and reached for the next higher branch. The sounds of pursuit pounded loudly in his head as he reached the third branch and grabbed onto the rope he had tied there earlier. He untied the rope and grasped it with both hands as he pushed off with his feet. The air rushed by the Sakovan as he flew over the river. He involuntarily raised his feet, although he was a good several paces above the surface of the water.

HawkShadow dropped from the rope as he cleared the riverbank on the opposite side of the river from his pursuers. He swiftly grabbed the rope and held it taut as he moved behind a large tree. Just mere seconds later, half a dozen horsemen appeared on the opposite shore. HawkShadow wove an air tunnel and listened to their conversation.

“Two of you to the left,” ordered the leader, “and two to the right. They have to be around here somewhere.”

“What about me?” asked the fifth rider.

“Search between here and the column,” instructed the leader. “They must be on horseback to escape this quickly. See if you can find

any tracks."

"Do you think this is the same group that attacked our scouts?" the fifth rider asked.

"It must be," mused the leader. "Only fools would attack an army of this size. It must be some group that has a grudge against the Nordon."

"More like a death wish," replied the fifth rider as he turned and rode away.

* * *

"Will your rider reach them in time?" Lord Marak asked Lord Marshal Orik.

'I am not sure," admitted Orik. "I ordered them to ride straight through."

"They will be tired when they reach Deep Bend," frowned Lord Marak. "It is not wise to ride into battle with exhausted troops."

"I expected only two cortes of Torak troops to be there," shrugged Orik. "It would not have been much of a battle, and I thought a swift response was rather important."

"Well, your swiftness has surprised me," conceded Lord Marak.

"Lord Marak," Latril said as she stepped into the room. "I need to see you immediately."

The Torak lord looked at Latril and saw the worry in her eyes. He nodded and excused himself as he left the room.

"What is the matter?" asked Lord Marak.

"I contacted Fardale to let them know that you were all right," Latril said softly. "It seems that HawkShadow contacted them early last night. He reported that the Nordon army did not stop for the night. They are continuing straight through to Deep Bend."

"As I just found out," nodded Lord Marak.

"Well," frowned Latril, "Lord Marshal Yenga authorized HawkShadow to delay them if it was possible. I thought you should know."

Lord Marak frowned as he pictured the Sakovan assassin attacking twelve cortes of Lord Patel's best men.

"Contact Fardale again," he ordered Latril. "If they hear from HawkShadow, he is to break off any fighting with the Nordon. Try to contact Cortain Talli at Deep Bend. If you get him, keep the air tunnel open and send for me. I will be with Lord Patel."

Lord Marak returned to Lord Patel's chambers.

"We need to halt your men," Lord Marak declared to Lord Patel. "Will your lord at Deep Bend be convincing enough to turn them back before they reach the estate?"

"Lord Grentle can be rather convincing," nodded Lord Patel, "but will your forces there allow him to leave the estate?"

“I think they will allow it,” Lord Marak said without elaboration. “Send Lord Grentle a message. He is to ride to the bridge over the Khadora River and await your troops. Send a second message from Lord Marshal Orik instructing the men to return here. Under no circumstances are Nordon troops to enter Deep Bend. If they do, there will be much bloodshed.”

“I will see to it immediately,” offered Lord Patel. “Do you wish to include a message for your own troops so they know what is going on?”

“An excellent idea,” nodded Lord Marak.

The notes were written and Lord Marshal Orik left to make arrangements to have them sent.

“I never did congratulate you on your election to the Lords’ Council,” Lord Patel said to break the silence.

“None of the members of the Lords’ Council did,” chuckled Lord Marak. “I did not really expect them to welcome me, but I also did not expect the open hostility from Lord Mirakotto.”

“There are power struggles even within the Lords’ Council,” Lord Patel explained. “Lord Mirakotto has enjoyed a majority of power on the council. Lord Woton and Lord Garic sided with Lord Mirakotto without exception. That alone gave the Argetta clan three votes on any issue.”

“What of the rest of you?” inquired the Torak lord.

“Lord Kiamesh has always opposed Mirakotto,” continued the Nordon lord. “Surely you sensed that during the brief meal and the voting in the Assembly of Lords?”

“I did,” nodded Lord Marak.

“Lord Quilo and I were the fence sitters,” shrugged Lord Patel. “Whatever Mirakotto wanted to get through the council required one of us to side with him. Personally, I found that position to be quite lucrative. Lord Mirakotto is not beyond sharing his wealth to ensure that he gets what he wants.”

“Does he always win?” questioned Lord Marak.

“Not always,” Lord Patel shook his head. “There are times when both Lord Quilo and I find Mirakotto’s proposals too radical, but those times are rare.”

“What about now?” asked Lord Marak. “Lord Woton will not be there to ensure victory for Lord Mirakotto.”

“Which is why he hates you, Lord Marak,” informed Lord Patel. “He would now have to buy the support of both Lord Quilo and me, but I am now aligned with you. Mirakotto will become quite dangerous when he finds that he can no longer win.”

“There is no reason for our relationship to be known,” stated Lord Marak. “In fact, by keeping your distance from me within the council,

you may become privy to certain information that is valuable to me."

"That will be impossible for me to do and maintain my Vows of Service, Lord Marak," the Nordon lord shook his head.

"Will it?" grinned Lord Marak. "You are sworn to me, but you do not have to like me. I am quite sure that you are capable of joining in their verbal roasting of me."

"I could indeed," chuckled Lord Patel. "In fact, I could be the worst roaster of all, but would you not see that as a breech in our agreement?"

"You know what Vows of Service are, Lord Patel," smiled Lord Marak. "As long as you do not work against my wishes, you are free to say what you think of me, at least before the Lords' Council. I would not accept such behavior from you if it were among the Nordon people. I doubt whether they would accept it either."

"You make a good point, Lord Marak," Lord Patel nodded seriously. "I could have enough of an attitude towards your policies that would make Lord Mirakotto believe that I still oppose you. In fact, I still do oppose your policies, although I am honor bound to implement them."

"You attitude will change over time," smiled Lord Marak. "In the meantime, find out what Lord Mirakotto is up to. I need to grab a bite to eat. Would you like anything while I am downstairs?"

Lord Patel looked at Lord Marak with surprise, but eventually he smiled and shook his head. "You really would bring me something, wouldn't you?" he chuckled.

"Why not?" laughed Lord Marak. "We are all human after all. I will be back shortly."

Lord Marak left the room and went into the kitchen. Several Torak soldiers were eating, as were Mistake and Katzu. Lord Marak grabbed a bowl of stew and a hunk of bread and sat down next to Mistake.

"I could not help overhearing your talk with Lord Patel," Mistake said softly. "You mentioned the Jiadin at those three estates. Is that true?"

"It is," Lord Marak nodded. "There are about five thousand at each estate."

"Then what I heard in Khadoratung may interest you," Mistake responded. "There are more Jiadin on another estate."

"Which one?" frowned Lord Marak.

"The one that I…stayed at for a while," Mistake answered as she shot a glance at Katzu.

Lord Marak understood that Mistake was trying to hide the fact that she had been a slave before Lord Marak freed her. He had no need to embarrass her.

“So the Pikata are hosting Jiadin as well,” he frowned. “How did you find this out?”

“I ran into Bursar Wicado in the marketplace,” explained Mistake. “He said that Brakas and Zygor showed up one day. The Jiadin started arriving the next day. He said that thousands have arrived already.”

“Brakas and Zygor,” Lord Marak frowned. “Those two are long past the time of their deaths. Are they still there?”

“No,” answered Mistake. “Wicado was confused about that, too. He said that Brakas left, but he never remembered seeing Zygor leave. He did say that Marshal Ulmreto also died that day, so I imagine that Zygor left in the commotion that must have followed.”

“If those two are involved with the Jiadin flooding into Khadora,” declared Lord Marak, “we are in for a tough battle.”

“Who are they?” asked Katzu.

“Brakas is a Fakaran who used to follow Grulak,” answered Mistake. “He is a dirty treacherous traitor to Fakara.”

“Zygor may well be something worse,” scowled Lord Marak. “He has magical abilities. He worked for Grulak to help track down and destroy the free tribes.”

“Magical abilities?” questioned Katzu. “Are you sure of this? A man who knows magic?”

“I am sure,” Mistake replied with a heavy frown. “He tried to kill me by shaking the mountain that I was on. He nearly succeeded.”

“Perhaps it was coincidence?” probed Katzu. “Earthquakes are not unknown in this area.”

“Every time Zygor raises his arms?” quipped Mistake. “I know a mage when I see one, Katzu.”

“I have heard tales this last week of another male mage,” frowned Katzu. “I tended to disbelieve those tales, but now you cause me to reevaluate.”

“Aakuta,” Lord Marak stated. “I heard the tales as well. I wonder if he is associated with Zygor?”

“Yes,” nodded Katzu, “Aakuta was the name that I heard. I also heard about the destruction of the palace cells. What do you know about that, Lord Marak?”

“I did not see the person,” answered Lord Marak. “The slit in the door did open before the destruction, but it was too dark to make out facial features. Whoever it was, he had great powers.”

* * *

The caravan paralleled the Fortung Mountains as it passed over the desolate Fakaran landscape. The soil was parched and cracked, and great whirls of dust rose from the lead horses. Werner grabbed his water skin and let a small sip of water roll around in his mouth before swallowing it. He pulled his scarf back over his lips and put the water

skin down on the seat of the wagon. He cursed the barren land that Aakuta had brought him to and wondered what the dark mage was up to. The wizard was certainly wealthy after taking the gold from Lord Druck. Why would he then load wagons with seed and come to this forsaken land?

Suddenly, Aakuta halted the lead wagon. Werner pulled back on the reins. The tired horses did not need much coaxing to stop. Werner jumped off the wagon and ran forward to see why they were stopping. He gazed at the wheels of the wagons as he passed to see if any had broken spokes. The wagons were fine, and Werner presumed that one of the lead horses was ailing. When he arrived at the front of the caravan, Aakuta was just climbing down from his seat.

"What is the matter?" asked Werner. "Why are we stopping?"

"This is our destination," Aakuta replied distractedly as he gazed around at the desolate landscape.

"Our destination?" echoed Werner. "You can't be serious? This is a desert. Nothing will grow here. It is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," Aakuta scowled as he turned to stare at Werner.

Werner recoiled from the dark eyes that peered into him from beneath the black hood. He felt a chill race up his spine, and he immediately turned away. Aakuta spent several more minutes admiring his chosen location. His eyes scanned the parched soil for any signs of human activity and found none.

"It does not look like anyone comes this way," Aakuta murmured to himself.

"Most assuredly not," Werner nodded exaggeratedly. "All of the trails into Fakara follow the rivers out of the mountains. We have been moving away from the river for a full day. Why would anyone come this way?"

"Unhitch the horses," Aakuta ordered, "and then remove the livestock and tether them to the wagons."

Werner immediately moved to obey the magician's orders, but he kept glancing back at Aakuta as if the mage were delirious. Aakuta walked away from the caravan, and Werner watched as the old mage marched far off. As Werner tied the wasooki and clova to one of the wagons, he saw the dark mage raise his hands high over his head. Suddenly, a great funnel of wind rose up from the area where Aakuta had stopped. The tornado grew in size and intensity as dirt and rocks flew skyward. Within moments, the dark spinning cloud mushroomed high overhead. Werner could feel soil raining down on his head as the large tornado blotted out the sun. Werner cringed behind one of the wagons.

The animals grew restless, and the horses started to pull the

wagons away. Werner dashed forward to restrain the horses, but the sun shone down on him before he got there. He looked up in awe and saw the great tornado spinning away to the south. He glanced towards Aakuta to see if the magician had been carried away, but the dark mage stood erect watching the storm flee.

Werner unhitched the nervous horses and tied them to the wagons. By the time he was done, Werner noticed that the sun was gone again. He glanced upward and saw dark clouds overhead once again, but this time there was no funnel. The clouds moved rapidly across the sky from all directions as if they were drawn by a magnet. He followed their movement and saw them gathering together over the dark mage.

Werner watched with nervous interest as lightning bolts lit up the dark clouds. Booming blasts of thunder rocked the land, and a tremendous rainfall fell upon the parched soil as if some great celestial giant was emptying a huge bucket. Torrents of rain pummeled the dry soil, and Werner pulled his hood over his head. The storm raged for over an hour and stopped just as suddenly as it began. The clouds turned into mere wisps and were swiftly blown away. Werner squinted out of his drenched hood and saw Aakuta walking towards him.

“There is a nice lake out there,” Aakuta said as he approached Werner. “Take the animals and water them.”

Werner nodded obediently and hurried off to perform his task, but his mind was on the dark mage. The old man had looked extremely tired, but even stranger, the magician’s clothes were dry and clean. Werner looked down at his own clothes, which were caked with mud, and wondered how Aakuta could have avoided both the dust storm and the rainstorm. He shook his head in confusion and untied the first group of animals.

When he returned for the second set of animals, Aakuta was snoring. He gazed warily at the dark mage sleeping in the bed of one of the wagons. He quietly took the next group of animals to the new lake. By the time he had watered all of the animals, the sun was dipping behind the Fortung Mountains. As the air began to cool, Aakuta sat up and yawned.

“Get some rest,” ordered Aakuta. “Tomorrow will be a hard day for you.”

Werner needed no prompting to fall asleep. He felt exhausted and did not even care that he had missed his evening meal.

When he awoke, Werner sat up and gazed about. His jaw dropped in surprise as he looked around. He shook his head several times to awake from his dream, but it was not a dream. He leaped off of the wagon and looked towards the new lake. The shores of the lake were green with grass, and tall palm trees towered upward around it.

Aakuta sat on a rock devouring a coconut.

"Come and eat," commanded Aakuta as he saw Werner moving about. "You will need your energy today."

"What has happened here?" Werner asked as he approached the mage.

"The land is reclaiming its life," shrugged Aakuta. "This used to be fertile land at one time. Wizards have salted it with magic to make a desert."

"But you are creating it," Werner shook his head. "I saw what you did yesterday."

"I am only helping," stated Aakuta. "Long ago there was a lake in that very spot. It is spring fed, in fact. It will once again hold water and nourish this land."

"Why are we here, Aakuta?" Werner asked cautiously. "You have enough gold to live in a fine mansion. Why do you choose this desert?"

"We will live in a mansion soon enough," Aakuta answered cryptically. "For now, this is our home."

"If you say so," shrugged Werner. "What tasks do you have for me today?"

"Your first task is to build pens for the animals," the mage replied.

"We have nothing to build with," frowned Werner. "How can I build pens with no wood?"

"You will use the wood from the wagons," instructed Aakuta. "We need a pen for the wasooki and one for the clova. Make the pens as large as the wood supply allows. For now we will just tie the horses to the outside of the pens. Later, we will need corrals."

"Later?" Werner echoed as his eyebrows rose. "You are planning on staying here for some time?"

"For some time," nodded the dark mage. "You, however, will be leaving soon. I have other tasks in mind for you."

"You want me to spread the seed we bought over this desert?" asked Werner.

"No," Aakuta shook his head, "I can accomplish that much easier than you can. You are going hunting."

"Hunting?" echoed Werner. "I doubt there is much game in these parts. What am I to hunt?"

"People," smirked the dark mage. "I understand that there are thousands of Jiadin running loose in this foul land. You are going to hunt them down."

Werner swallowed the lump in his throat and exhaled loudly. "You want me to hunt the Jiadin?" he asked in a whisper. "By myself? I am no coward, Aakuta, but I think we should talk about this. I have

heard tales of the Jiadin. They are not to be taken lightly. They would cut your throat for one of those clova we brought with us."

"You are not going to kill them," chuckled the magician. "You are going to bring them to me. Let me worry about them cutting my throat. The Jiadin do not scare me any more than your feeble armies in Khadora."

"Still," Werner said hesitantly, "the Jiadin will kill us both for your food."

"It is not my food," retorted Aakuta. "It is their food. You will tell them of this secret lush valley that has food aplenty. Gathering them will not be hard. You just go find them, and bring them to me. I will handle the rest."

"They will not be pleased when they arrive to this desert that I described as a lush valley," Werner shook his head. "Even that lake and palm trees will not satisfy them."

"It will be lush before you return with the first of the Jiadin," promised Aakuta. "You must learn to trust me, Werner."

"I will try," promised the Khadoran. "Where will I find these Jiadin?"

"You will find them in ones and twos all over this land," the dark mage replied. "Make sure that they wear the red scarf. I do not want anyone else knowing of this valley. You will never give directions to this place. You will personally guide each group here. Do you see that rock at the base of the mountains that looks like a ram?"

Werner turned and gazed at the mountains. His eyes scanned the bare rocks until he saw the one that Aakuta was referring to.

"I see it," nodded Werner.

"When you find Jiadin," instructed the mage, "you will bring them along the base of the mountains until you see that rock. Only then will you move away from the base of the mountains. This is very important, Werner. Do you understand?"

"I think so," nodded Werner, "but can I ask why my approach is so important?"

"I will not let others see the valley that I am about to create," explained Aakuta. "Only you and I will know how to enter it. To anyone crossing this barren desert, this valley will not exist. You see, there is to be a price for the Jiadin who come here. I will not allow them to leave and then lead others here. Only the two of us will know the entrance. Do not describe the ram rock to anyone."

"It shall be as you wish," nodded Werner, "but I do not see how you can hide this valley from others. Surely, anyone who happens across it will see the lake."

Aakuta shook his head and scowled as he waved his hand in the air. "Do you see the lake now?" he asked.

Werner turned to gaze at the lake. His mouth hung open as his eyes scanned the surface of the desert. There was no lake to be seen. There were no palm trees. There was nothing as far as his eyes could see.

“How did you do that?” gasped Werner.

Aakuta shook his head as he made the lake reappear. He turned and glared at Werner.

“Never, ever doubt me again,” scowled the dark mage. “I do not like wasting my powers to prove myself to those who do not understand. You will do what I require, or I shall dispense with you. That is all that you need to know. Now, go build those pens.”

Werner felt a chill run through his body as the dark mage glared at him. His limbs began to shake uncontrollably, and he forced himself to turn away from the dark eyes piercing his soul. As he stumbled away from Aakuta, he promised himself that he would never question the dark mage’s orders again.

Chapter 22

Jiadin

The sun had not yet cleared the Fortung Mountains to the east, and a light fog blanketed the land. Early workers on the Devon clan estate moved about unhurriedly as they readied for a new day of work. Some of the white and black clad soldiers were cleaning up in a large basin of water alongside the barracks. Others were stretching or doing their morning exercises. Several women were tending to the chickens. It was the start of a normal day for the Devon clan.

The first hint of trouble came, ironically, from a small boy playing with his dog. As he tried to teach his puppy to fetch, the dog began barking as it stared into the tall fields of corn. The young boy tried calling the puppy, but it was too engrossed with whatever was in the cornfield. The boy pouted and then walked towards the dog to carry him away. Suddenly, an arrow flew from the cornfield and silenced the barking dog. The little boy halted as confusion clouded his features. He looked at the dead dog and then stared into the cornfield. Something moved, and the young boy screamed. He turned and ran towards the mansion as fast as he could, but he could not outrun the arrow that slammed into his back.

The women feeding the chickens heard the boy's scream. They turned and saw the boy fall. One of the women ran towards the boy, thinking he had just fallen. The other women watched in horror as the soldiers in blue and yellow streamed out of the cornfield. Several arrows sought out the first woman, and she tumbled to the ground before she ever reached the young boy.

"Vessi!" shouted one of the women feeding the chickens.

In seconds the call was repeated all around the mansion of Lord Hanold, but the warning was far too late. Hordes of Vessi archers rode through the front gate, easily dispatching the two Devon sentries. Hundreds of Vessi swordsmen charged out of the cornfields, the mature crop trampled under their boots. More Vessi cavalrymen charged through the small peach orchard on one side of the mansion, while Vessi archers rained arrows on the barracks area on the other side of the mansion. The Vessi attackers struck down anyone who moved in the early morning mist.

Within moments, thousands of Vessi soldiers were swarming over the small Devon estate. One rider, wearing the plumes of a cortain in the Vessi army, dismounted at the front of the mansion. Other Vessi

soldiers soon dismounted near him.

“Nobody leaves the mansion,” the cortain ordered. “Round them up and bring them to the meeting room. Move!”

The Vessi soldiers threw open the door and charged into the mansion. After the long line of soldiers entered, the cortain casually walked through the doorway. He stopped inside the get his bearings and locate the meeting room. A young woman ran from under the stairs carrying a young boy. She tried to race out the front door, but the cortain was ready for her. He pulled his sword and caught her in the side as she tried to race by. She fell to the floor soundlessly, but the young boy began crying. The cortain grabbed the young boy by his arm and dragged him towards the meeting room.

“Somebody guard the front door,” shouted the cortain. “I said nobody was to escape.”

A soldier ran out of a nearby room and took up a position at the front door. The cortain kicked open the door of the meeting room and marched in. He dumped the boy on the floor and strode to the long table. He pulled at the chair at the head of the table and sat down where the lord of the Devon clan would normally sit. Within moments, Vessi soldiers began dragging people into the meeting room. One of the people shoved into the meeting room was recognizable to the cortain.

“Sit, Lord Hanold,” commanded the cortain.

The lord of the Devon clan pulled out a chair and sat down. “Who are you?” he asked. “And what is the meaning of this attack?”

“I am Cortain Skara,” answered the cortain, “and I will be asking the questions, not you. Who is your seneschal?”

Lord Hanold refused to answer. His eyes glared at the Vessi cortain, but his lips remained sealed. Cortain Skara looked around the room. His eyes came to rest on an old woman, and he nodded to one of his men. The Vessi soldier marched over to the old woman and ran his sword through her chest.

“Who is your seneschal?” Cortain Skara repeated.

Lord Hanold remained unmoved by the execution. He refused to answer. Suddenly, an old white-haired man stepped forward.

“I am the seneschal,” offered the old man. “What do you want with me?”

“I want to know the number of people authorized to wear the family pin,” demanded Cortain Skara.

“Fourteen,” answered the seneschal.

“Point them out,” ordered the Vessi cortain.

The old man frowned, but he walked around the room pointing to Lord Hanold’s family members. As he pointed someone out, a nearby soldier would push them towards the table and tell them to sit. The

small boy that the cortain dragged into the room was the last to be seated. Cortain Skara counted the family members and smiled.

"Take the rest of them out of here," ordered Cortain Skara. "Put them to work cleaning up this place. And have the morning meal prepared. I will dine in the lord's suite."

The Vessi soldiers shoved the people out of the meeting room, except for the lord and his family. Cortain Skara rose and walked to the door. He signaled for several of his men to return to the room.

"Kill them all," he commanded as he pointed into the meeting room. "Then get someone to clean up the mess."

Cortain Skara ignored the screams as he loped up the stairs in search of the lord's suite.

* * *

The incessant hammering pounded in Lord Marak's head. He rolled over and the sunshine lit up his face. Slowly, he opened his eyes and saw that it was daylight out. He leaped out of bed and pulled his clothes on.

"It is about time that you got up," quipped Botal as he stuck his head in the door. "Would you care for a morning meal?"

"Very much so," answered Lord Marak. "What is all that hammering?"

"You wanted this house completed quickly," replied Botal. "Norman has crews working on it from first light until the sun sets. I am surprised that you could sleep through that racket."

"Not arriving until the middle of the night might have something to do with it," groused Lord Marak. "Has Norman solved the problem of stabling our horses?"

"He has a great idea that he wanted to talk to you about," nodded Botal. "There is enough room to expand the building if we are willing to give up the alley that runs between this house and the next."

"I would prefer larger stables to an alley," remarked Lord Marak. "Tell him to go ahead with it. Make sure he understands that I want to keep the number of Torak horses in the stables hidden from prying eyes."

"He is well aware of you concerns," smiled Botal. "Let me get you some food, and I will tell you the rest of the news."

Lord Marak nodded sleepily. He was normally a rather light sleeper, rising before dawn, but the last few days running around to all of the Nordon estates to receive the Vows of Service had taken its toll. They had not arrived back in Khadoratung until the wee hours of the morning. He wondered what time it was and looked out the window to gauge the height of the sun. He blinked several times as he realized that half the morning was already gone.

Lord Marak cleaned up in a basin and ran downstairs.

Construction debris was everywhere, as were the workers. The workers had been drawn from various Torak estates, and most of them greeted him as he ran by. He nodded silently and made his way to the dining room. Mistake, StarWind, and HawkShadow were already there.

"Morning, Your Highness," grinned Mistake. "Had enough beauty sleep?"

"You are lucky my eyes are still filled with sleep," grumbled Lord Marak, "or I would hit you with a Sakovan star."

"I never thought I would see anyone grumpier than HawkShadow in the morning," laughed StarWind.

"Don't let them rile you, Marak," chuckled HawkShadow. "None of us were awake an hour ago. It seems like a long time since we were in this city."

"You sound homesick. Are you thinking of returning to the Sakova?" asked Lord Marak.

"Today," nodded HawkShadow. "General Didyk has been gone for some time. There is no reason for us to delay any longer."

"I understand," nodded Lord Marak. "I will miss the three of you. I want to thank you for everything that you have done for me these last few weeks. Each of you has made a great difference here in Khadora."

"Perhaps we will find a reason to visit again," smiled StarWind. "We learned a lot while we were here."

"You are always welcome," replied Lord Marak. "I guess you will be taking the elf with you to the Sakova?"

"Hey," grinned Mistake. "Behave or I will tell the Emperor on you."

"Lyra has authorized it," replied StarWind. "She thinks it is wise to meet with some of the Fakarans, and she is intrigued about the possibility of Mistake and MistyTrail being related."

"I am sure that they are related," grinned Lord Marak. "MistyTrail always gave me a hard time, too."

The room fell silent as someone banged on the front door of the house. Lord Marak saw Gunta race past the open door of the dining room. He heard muted talking and then the door shut. Seconds later, Gunta entered the room with Botal right behind him with a plate of food for Lord Marak.

"That was an Imperial guard," reported Gunta. "The Emperor would like to see you at your earliest convenience."

"How in Khadora did he know I was back in the city?" Lord Marak asked as Botal slid the plate of food in front of him.

"He would be negligent not to have spies scattered all across the city," responded StarWind. "Finding them will give your people

something to do."

"I am sure that it will," nodded Lord Marak as he ate a few spoonfuls of food before rising. "I should not keep the Emperor waiting."

"I will ready the squad," Botal offered.

"Just Gunta and Halman will do," Lord Marak shook his head.

Botal's forehead creased heavily. "At least finish your morning meal," Botal said. "You may be with the Emperor for hours. Do not expect him to feed you."

Lord Marak frowned as he stared at Botal. The squad leader had never been one to make demands, but he did have a valid point. Lord Marak sat back down and started eating. Botal and Gunta left the room. StarWind and HawkShadow discussed the route they would take to the Sakova. As he ate, Lord Marak heard the front door close again. He looked expectantly towards the dining room door, but nobody arrived. He shrugged and continued eating. Several more times he heard the front door close. Finally, he stood up and started to leave the room.

"Sit and eat," laughed Mistake. "Nobody is coming in."

StarWind and HawkShadow stopped talking and turned to see what was going on.

"How do you know?" asked Lord Marak. "I heard the door close several times."

"Of course you did," grinned Mistake. "That is people leaving, not coming in."

"Who would be leaving at this hour?" questioned Lord Marak. "The work day is far from over."

"Torak soldiers are leaving," explained Mistake. "You refused a proper escort, but you did not forbid sentries along the way. Botal has been sending men in pairs. I suspect that they will explore every nook and cranny between here and the palace."

"You really should let Botal manage a proper escort for you," warned StarWind. "You know they care for you."

"I know," sighed Lord Marak as he sat back down. "Each and every member of that squad has refused promotions. They would rather be part of the squad that escorts me than be Cortains or Lectains or Marshals."

"You could not ask for better men," smiled HawkShadow. "Let them do their job."

"I will," Lord Marak said decisively as he rose. "May Kaltara watch over the three of you as you journey to the Sakova."

Lord Marak walked into the hallway. Gunta and Halman were waiting and Botal was nearby.

"Form up the rest of your men, Squad Leader," grinned Marak.

“We are going to the Imperial Palace.”

Botal’s eyes grew large with surprise. For once he was at a loss for words as he tried to figure out what to do. All of the squad had already been dispatched to watch the route that Lord Marak would take to the palace. There was no way that he could form a squad now if he wanted to.

“All right,” laughed Lord Marak. “We will pick them up as we go. Come on.”

“You knew?” sighed Botal as he joined the group.

“Actually,” grinned Lord Marak as he stepped through the front door, “a little elf told me.”

Botal led the small group along the street towards the Imperial Palace. He signaled for his men to join the group as they passed them. By the time they reached the Imperial Palace, the whole squad was in formation. The palace appeared deserted without all of the lords of Khadora and their escorts. Most of the people visible inside were Imperial guards. As they walked past the Assembly Chamber, Lord Marak glanced at the first door along the left residence corridor. There was a shiny gold plaque on the door inscribed with the Torak name.

“Look at this,” Lord Marak said as he detoured down the residence corridor and stopped in front of the door. “Check it out while I am with the Emperor, Botal. I will meet you back here.”

Botal nodded and Lord Marak turned around and headed for the nearest stairwell. Gunta and Halman stuck with the Torak lord while the rest of the squad entered their new quarters. Lord Marak ascended the stairs quickly and marched along the hall to the waiting pair of Imperial guards. They nodded to him and one of them immediately opened the door. Gunta and Halman did not hesitate and followed Lord Marak into the Emperor’s office.

“Lord Marak,” greeted Emperor Bagora. “Come, sit down.”

Gunta and Halman stopped at the door and stood to each side of it as Lord Marak walked across the room and sat before the desk. The Emperor frowned when he noticed the two Torak soldiers.

“You are safe in this room, Lord Marak,” stated the Emperor. “Even my own guards do not feel a need to be in here to protect me.”

“Unless their presence bothers you, Emperor,” smiled Lord Marak, “I will let them stay. They become nervous when I am not in their sight. I was fortunate to make it to your office without an entire squad following me.”

“Very well,” nodded the Emperor. “I am pleased that you arrived so quickly. I have had some rather disturbing news from Katzu about a matter you discussed with Lord Patel.”

Lord Marak frowned at the mention of the mediator’s name. He had trusted Katzu with a great deal of knowledge, and while he

trusted the Emperor, it churned his stomach to think that Katzu would repeat his secrets.

"Is this about the Nordon?" asked Lord Marak.

"Oh goodness, no," chuckled the Emperor. "Yes, I did try to squeeze out of Katzu what happened between you and Lord Patel, but he refuses to say. I did notice that the Torak clan now has a Deep Bend estate. Am I to assume that relations between you and Lord Patel are no longer dangerous?"

"That matter has been solved amicably," answered Lord Marak. "What exactly did Katzu say?"

"You mentioned Fakarans taking up with clans in Khadora," began the Emperor.

"Jiadin, actually," interrupted Lord Marak. "The bulk of Fakarans are friendly to Khadora. The Jiadin are not."

"I stand corrected," nodded the Emperor. "These Jiadin worry me. They are being used by some lords to aggressively pursue their neighbors."

"Their intention is chaos," declared Lord Marak. "Grulak had planned to attack Khadora with a hundred thousand men. Had he succeeded, he would have destroyed most of this country. This is one of the reasons that I stress uniting the clans. Separated as we are, we can be picked off one by one."

"That is exactly what is happening now," declared the Emperor. "Three clans have ceased to exist in the last week. The latest was the Devon clan. They were attacked by the Vessi for no apparent reason."

"Then it has begun," frowned Lord Marak. "I had not expected it so soon. Should the Lords' Council meet on this?"

"They could," shrugged Emperor Bagora, "but there is nothing that they can do. No clan has asked for mediation. No clan has declared that they were attacked without provocation. In fact, no clan has complained. The reason for that, Lord Marak, is that there are no clans to complain. In each of the attacks, every living member of the ruling family was destroyed. There was nobody left with legal standing to file an appeal to the Lords' Council."

"And there will never be," sighed Lord Marak. "These Jiadin will conquer one estate at a time until they are at our door. How then do our laws help us, Emperor?"

"I don't know," conceded the Emperor. "Katzu returned from talking to Lord Samert about the latest attack. He was basically told that no mediation was requested and told to leave. Never has a Lords' Council mediator been treated so shabbily."

"But Lord Samert was within his legal rights to ask Katzu to leave," Lord Marak pointed out. "What does the Emperor propose to do about it?"

“I was hoping that you would have an idea,” confessed the Emperor. “You are, after all, the one noted for accomplishing things in a strange fashion.”

“Make it illegal to kill a lord,” suggested Lord Marak.

“We cannot do that,” the Emperor shook his head. “Too many laws allow for such a death or enslavement. Our basic structure of law is that the clan lord is responsible for the failings of the clan. As such, his life is forfeit if he transgresses and is defeated.”

“Well,” frowned Lord Marak, “your laws have a loophole in them. You are allowing foreigners to destroy your country. You could make a law that forbids the killing of the last surviving member of a clan, or one against using foreign mercenaries in your army, but none of that will work. Suppose you did have a law to use against these clans. How would you enforce it? You do not have enough Imperial troops to stand against even one of those clans.”

“You are right,” the Emperor nodded sadly. “The only solution is the one you mentioned the day we met. We must have a culture that allows our clans to fight together as one. We certainly do not have that today.”

“It is even worse than you know,” Lord Marak said. “I have learned that there is a fourth clan filling up with Jiadin warriors. The Pikata clan will be the next to be heard from.”

“Lord Damirath?” questioned the Emperor. “That is hard to believe. He might take Fakaran slaves in once in a while, but other than that, he would have nothing to do with that country.”

“I believe my information to be accurate,” insisted Lord Marak. “Two notorious Jiadin have been at the Pikata estate. One of them is a mage.”

“I will have that checked out,” declared the Emperor. “What would you do if you were Emperor, Lord Marak?”

“That is hard for me to imagine,” the Torak lord said after a long pause. “My first thought is a military one. I am quite sure that it would not be legal, but I would amass a great army and kick the Jiadin out of Khadora.”

“That is exactly what I would like to do,” agreed Emperor Bagora. “At least we both realize that it is illegal. I suppose I should call a Lords’ Council meeting on this issue. Everyone is close by now that you have returned.”

“When will it be?” asked Lord Marak.

“This afternoon,” decided the Emperor. “That should give you time to check out the craftsmen that infest your home.”

“Someday,” grinned Lord Marak as he rose, “I would like to discuss your spy network with you.”

“That will probably be the same day that we discuss your secret

agreements with a growing list of lords in Khadora," grinned the Emperor. "Stay safe, Lord Marak."

Lord Marak gathered Gunta and Halman and returned downstairs. He briefly viewed the new Torak quarters before leaving for his house with his full squad.

"We could fit more than a corte of troops in the new quarters," Botal said happily.

"Probably two," nodded Lord Marak. "We should talk about stationing some troops permanently in Khadoratung. I need to contact Tagoro and find out how his recruiting is coming along. I would like another meal when we get back, Botal."

The Torak squad entered the house. Lord Marak went into the dining room and saw Latril sitting with Fisher. He smiled at both of them and sat down.

"What news do you have for me, Fisher?" asked Lord Marak.

"No word on the assassin," reported the spy. "I did some research on the Neju clan, though. Jamarat is the end of the line for the Neju. Woton had no sons and Jamarat never married. The man really has the mind of a child."

"I noticed that," nodded Lord Marak. "What is worse is how Mirakotto uses him. I would like to do something for him if I could. The Neju clan is a founding clan and rich in history."

"Which makes their situation even more deplorable," frowned Fisher. "Woton spent his time on affairs of the Lords' Council. He did not bother much with the running of his estates. Jamarat does not have the mental capacity to handle the job, and most of the Neju advisors are ancient and feeble. The only good thing that could be said about the Neju is their army. They have a large army, and it is well equipped and well trained."

"What about their finances?" asked the Torak lord.

"I had Kasa check that out," answered Fisher. "They have numerous estates with fertile soil. Their herds are healthy. Their only problem appears to be mishandling their finances. Basically, Jamarat is like Woton in that he spends more than they make. If they had a good bursar, I think their estates would be quite prosperous."

"Latril, didn't you help Kasa with the finances when we merged the Situ estates into our own?" asked Lord Marak.

"I did," nodded Latril. "It is fairly simple work. At least it is if you are good with numbers, which I guess I am. Do you want me to help the Neju? Would they accept such help?"

"I would not ask you to do anything that you didn't want to," replied Lord Marak, "but you would also have the benefit of being able to talk to Kasa whenever you needed to."

"I would not mind," offered Latril. "After traveling with you for a

while and seeing what it is that you are trying to do, I am actually excited to be able to play an active part. Anything I can do to make Khadora the country you dream of, I would gladly do."

"Would Jamarat accept help from the Torak clan?" asked Fisher.

"I don't know," admitted Lord Marak, "but I am willing to ask him. I did tell him that if he needed help, I would be willing to give it. I cannot go out there today, though. The Emperor is calling a Lords' Council meeting this afternoon to discuss the Jiadin issue. The Khadoran clans hosting the Jiadin have begun gobbling up their neighbors."

"I will take Latril out to see Jamarat," offered Fisher. "I will play the role of a special emissary from the Torak clan and tell him that you were concerned for him and wanted to help. The worst he can do is not believe me."

"Fisher," laughed Lord Marak. "I cannot imagine anyone who would not believe whatever you wanted them to."

Chapter 23

Anyone Can Play

Lord Patel entered the Lords' Council Chamber and looked briefly around the room. The only lord present was Lord Mirakotto, and the Argetta lord seemed absorbed in thoughts of his own. Lord Patel walked to a small table in the corner of the room and served himself a cup of tea before sitting down at the long table occupying the center of the room.

"Ah, Lord Patel," Lord Mirakotto said as he finally noticed someone in the room. "I see that the Toraks have a new estate at Deep Bend. Did some young lord nip your ankles?"

"I resent your implication, Mirakotto," Lord Patel replied. "It is well known that the orchard at Deep Bend has never been much of a concern to me."

"True," Lord Mirakotto responded with just a tinge of a smirk. "How is it then that Lord Marak is now owner of the estate?"

"He showed an interest in it," shrugged Lord Patel. "Perhaps some lords have more money than they know what to do with. Since when do the Argetta care about the Nordon holdings? Or is your interest more in Lord Marak?"

"My interest," frowned Lord Mirakotto, "is in keeping track of alliances within the Lords' Council. I endeavor to know if you are starting to lean towards this boy lord?"

"Lean towards him?" laughed Lord Patel. "Your spies should be hung, Lord Mirakotto. I do not normally keep two cortes of troops sitting on the road to the south of the city at the end of the Assembly of Lords."

"I had heard of your troops," nodded Lord Mirakotto. "My first thought was that you planned to ambush Lord Marak on his way home. That is why news of Deep Bend greatly disturbed me."

"I will not sit here and discuss such things as ambushes," warned Lord Patel. "If I had ever planned to do such a thing, I would certainly not admit to it." Lord Patel let a smile play across his lips as he added, "Besides, I understand that he managed to slip out of the city unseen by anyone."

"He did," laughed Lord Mirakotto. "Well, I am glad that we had this little talk, Lord Patel. You have reassured me of your good intentions. This Lord Marak is a threat to our very way of life. I am suspicious of his relationship with the Emperor."

“You are suspicious of everyone,” chuckled Lord Patel. “I suppose that it was your man who attempted to kill the Emperor?”

Lord Mirakotto’s expression turned dark as he glared at the Nordon lord. At that moment, Lord Garic and Lord Quilo entered the chamber, and the conversation was interrupted by greetings. Within a few minutes, Lord Marak and Lord Kiamesh entered and everyone took a seat at the table.

“Emperor Bagora has requested this meeting of the Lords’ Council,” declared Lord Kiamesh. “A situation has arisen that he thinks we need to address, or at least discuss. There have been three wars in the last week. Each of these occurred in the eastern frontier, and each involved Fakaran troops. In all cases, the ruling families of the defending clans have been annihilated.”

“Fakarans?” interrupted Lord Quilo. “Which three clans are using Fakaran warriors?”

“The Vessi, Glamaraldi, and Lejune clans are using Jiadin warriors,” answered Lord Kiamesh.

“And what does the Emperor expect us to do?” asked Lord Garic. “If there is no heir to the lord’s seat, then the clan is dissolved. This can not be undone.”

“We do have the ability to recognize new clans,” interjected Lord Quilo.

“Yes,” Lord Mirakotto retorted as he glared at Lord Marak, “and look where that has gotten us.”

“I do not think the issue is necessarily preserving the lost clans,” interrupted Lord Patel. “The issue is that these three clans are using our laws in such a way as to thwart their intent. Our laws were designed to stop needless attacks among the clans. These rogue clans have discovered that they can annihilate the ruling family and be safe from reprisal. What is to stop them from continuing these attacks until they are no longer restricted to the frontier?”

“When the attacks are no longer restricted to the frontier,” retorted Lord Garic, "is when they become a problem for this council. What happens to the frontier is not something that requires my attention.”

“The frontier is as much a part of Khadora as the Imperial Valley,” Lord Marak declared. “It was my impression that the Lords’ Council governed over all of Khadora, not just the Imperial Valley.”

“I am sure your attitude would be vastly different, Lord Marak,” sneered Lord Mirakotto, “if it was the Torak clan gobbling up its neighbors in the southern frontier. I am sure you would expect the Lords’ Council to keep its nose out of your business.”

“I have been subject to rulings of the Lords’ Council even on the southern frontier,” countered Lord Marak. “I have never felt that the

Lords' Council was interfering."

"Yet the mediations that you have had are quite mysterious," stated Lord Mirakotto. "Why is that you can claim the rights of rulings of this body and yet refuse to inform us of what has transpired?"

"The ruling between the Torak clan and the Situ clan is an open affair," declared Lord Marak. "The situation between Fardale and the Sorgan and Litari clans was not mediated. It was a private ruling and not subject to the scrutiny of the Lords' Council. May I say that we are getting off topic here? This meeting is not to discuss the Torak clan. The use of thousands of Jiadin to eradicate whole clans is a serious matter, for all of Khadora."

"We are getting sidetracked," agreed Lord Kiamesh. "I do not think that any of us can honestly say that these attacks are not disturbing to the fabric of Khadora. The question is, what can we do about it?"

"We could pass a law forbidding foreigners to fight in a clan army," suggested Lord Patel.

"And how would we enforce it?" questioned Lord Kiamesh. "The point is that these lords have situated themselves to be above the law. Do you really think they will accept a ruling of the Lords' Council without us having the force to back it up?"

"The armies of the members of the Lords' Council are impressive," remarked Lord Marak. "If we were to combine our forces, those rebellious lords would have to listen. We could demand that the Jiadin be sent back to Fakara."

"Our armies may indeed be together on a battlefield one day, Lord Marak," quipped Lord Mirakotto, "but I doubt they will be on the same side."

"Your patriotism is overwhelming, Lord Mirakotto," retorted Lord Marak. "Our country is facing a crisis, and all you can think of is your own agenda."

"I do not have to take such insolence from you, boy lord," snapped Lord Mirakotto as he stood up. "I was member of the Lords' Council when you were still a squad leader for some obscure minor lord on the frontier. Do not presume to lecture me on what is good for Khadora. Your presence here makes a mockery of the Lords' Council."

Lord Mirakotto turned and stormed out of the chamber. There was silence in the room for several minutes as nobody knew what to say.

"We cannot continue a meeting of the Lords' Council with a member missing," Lord Kiamesh finally declared. "The only exception is when a lord is away for an extended period of time and cannot possibly return in a reasonable period timeframe. I have no choice but to adjourn this meeting."

“Well done, Lord Marak,” sniped Lord Garic as he rose and left the chamber.

“When will this meeting be rescheduled?” asked Lord Marak.

“Rescheduled?” echoed Lord Kiamesh as his eyebrow rose. “For what purpose, Lord Marak? There are some among us who do not recognize that there is a problem yet. If there is no problem, there can be no solution.”

“So the Lords’ Council is to stand by and do nothing while the Jiadin march across our country?” countered Lord Marak. “All of the eastern frontier clans are small, Lord Kiamesh, and most of them hold only single estates. The Jiadin will continue to gobble them up while we do nothing. With every clan they take over, they gain more warriors. By the time we act, we will not be facing twenty thousand warriors. We will be facing a hundred thousand. Who then will stand against them?”

“There have been no violations of law,” sighed Lord Quilo. “The Lords’ Council cannot arbitrarily take action against a clan. There must be a dispute or a violation of law first.”

Lord Marak rose and left the chamber. He marched directly to the Emperor’s office and asked for admission. He was immediately shown in.

“I heard that the Lords’ Council adjourned without a resolution of the problem,” greeted Emperor Bagora.

“Lord Mirakotto stormed out,” nodded Lord Marak. “I cannot understand how anything gets done here.”

“Welcome to politics,” shrugged the Emperor. “What will you do now?”

“What can I do?” replied Lord Marak. “I am tempted to amass my armies and go after the Jiadin on my own. The problem is that I would leave my people defenseless, and there are other heartless scavengers in Khadora besides the Jiadin.”

“The Torak army is hardly capable of facing such great odds,” frowned the Emperor. “There may be a way that you can help, though.”

“Oh?” brightened Lord Marak. “And how is that?”

“You could form an alliance with one of the clans on the eastern frontier,” suggested the Emperor. “Lord Oktar of the Balomar clan is in Khadoratung. He came to see me today about these very problems. It seems that his estate is in the path of the Glamaraldi, and he expects to be the next to be attacked. He wants help from the government and it saddened me that I had to refuse.”

“An alliance?” pondered Lord Marak. “Normally an alliance is not invoked until after an attack. By then it would be too late.”

“True,” shrugged the Emperor. “Still it might lead to a solution.

Why don't you talk to him?"

"Where is he?" asked Lord Marak.

"I thought you would never ask," grinned the Emperor as he rang a bell. An Imperial soldier opened the door and stuck his head in. "Send in Katzu and Lord Oktar," ordered the Emperor.

Within moments the two men entered the Emperor's office. Katzu introduced Lord Oktar to Lord Marak.

"I trust the Emperor has explained my problem?" inquired Lord Oktar. "The Glamaraldi are sure to strike me next. There is nothing I can do to defend myself."

Lord Marak frowned for a moment and then looked at the mediator. "I don't suppose that you have any ideas regarding a solution to this, do you Katzu?"

"I am sure that you have a solution, Lord Marak," grinned the mediator, "but for some reason, it fails to come to my lips."

Lord Marak grinned as Katzu chuckled and Lord Oktar shook his head in confusion. The Emperor merely sat and watched everyone else.

"That might work," Lord Marak finally said, "but that would depend upon Lord Oktar. Perhaps we should go someplace quiet and discuss it?"

"There is no place more deserving for this conversation than right here," Katzu said as he nodded towards the Emperor.

Lord Marak frowned. It was obvious what Katzu was suggesting, but he also was saying that the Emperor should be aware of the agreement. He did not understand Katzu's motivation.

"Why?" Lord Marak asked Katzu.

"Lord Oktar does not know you well," Katzu replied. "I doubt he would see the wisdom of your suggestion without the blessing of the Emperor."

Lord Marak nodded and pondered whether he wanted to let anyone else know how he had been gaining power. It was not that he distrusted the Emperor, but rather his desire to minimize the number of people who knew the details of his other arrangements. In the end, the welfare of Khadora won the battle within Lord Marak.

"Very well," nodded Lord Marak. "There is one solution that I can see to save your clan, Lord Oktar."

"I suddenly feel that there will be a heavy price to pay for your help, Lord Marak," Lord Oktar said skeptically. "What must I give up?"

"Your slaves for one," answered Lord Marak.

"Done," Lord Oktar immediately replied.

"Let me finish," continued Lord Marak. "What I propose, Lord Oktar, is for you to swear Vows of Service to me. You will continue as

the clan lord of the Balomar, and make decisions as you do now, but I will be the ultimate authority over you."

"You ask a great deal, Lord Marak," frowned Lord Oktar. "I can lose my estate to the Glamaraldi, or I can give it away to you. That is hardly a reprieve."

"It is not as bad as you think, Lord Oktar," countered Lord Marak. "May I have your vow of silence on this matter before going further?"

"I will not speak of it," agreed the Balomar lord, "but I am not agreeing to your solution either."

"Emperor?" prompted Lord Marak as he looked at Bagora.

"If you are about to reveal the answers to questions I have long sought," grinned the Emperor, "you have my vow of silence."

"Very well," Lord Marak said. "Lord Oktar, I already have this arrangement with a number of clans in Khadora. I have never suggested it to anyone who had not attacked me before, but I am looking for a way to help you. Not only you, but all of Khadora."

"What other clans would vow away their rights?" asked Lord Oktar.

"At first it was the Sorgan and Litari," answered Lord Marak as he watched the faces of both the Emperor and Lord Oktar. "Then the Ragatha joined and then the Situ. Most recently, the Nordon have executed the Vows of Service."

"The Nordon?" echoed Lord Oktar. "Are you saying that Lord Patel has given Vows of Service to you?"

"He has as have all of his people," nodded Lord Marak.

"But he is a member of the Lords' Council," protested Lord Oktar. "How can that be?"

"I do not absorb other clans if I can help it," explained Lord Marak. "I believe each Khadoran clan has a rich heritage of its own. I think they should continue as independent clans."

"Independent?" questioned Lord Oktar. "How can you be independent and owe allegiance to another?"

"Do you have allegiance to the Lords' Council?" asked Lord Marak.

"Of course," nodded Lord Oktar.

"And to the Emperor?" pushed Lord Marak.

"As all clans must," agreed Lord Oktar.

"Then what is the difference?" prompted Lord Marak. "Your clan will still be distinct. Think of me as another level of the government, except that I will send troops to protect you."

"The Torak clan is small," pondered Lord Oktar. "How many troops can you really spare, and will they be enough to matter?"

"Both are good questions," replied Lord Marak. "I will draw forces from all of the clans sworn to me. I will not draw so many that the

defense of any other estate is threatened, but I think I can put together a rather potent force. Will it be enough? I am not sure. It will certainly be enough to prevent a quick demise of your estate. It will be enough to allow you to call upon the Lords' Council for a mediator, but I cannot promise to destroy all of the Jiadin. The Glamaraldi are only one clan who is using these foreigners to steal land. If the other clans join with the Glamaraldi, we will be in trouble."

"Your answer is not sweetened, Lord Marak," sighed Lord Oktar. "I appreciate such candidness, but give me an estimate of the number of troops you are willing to commit."

"If I pull two cortes off each estate," Lord Marak mentally calculated, "I could bring three thousand men."

Lord Oktar was silent for a long time before he finally nodded. "You have yourself a deal, Lord Marak," he said. "My people will swear Vows of Service to you in return for your protection. Katzu was correct, by the way, of holding this talk here. Had we spoken anywhere outside the Emperor's presence, I would be refusing your offer. I know Bagora well, and if he has faith in you, then so do I. Please do not let me down, Lord Marak."

"I will not let you down," promised Lord Marak. "I will make arrangement today for the troops to start assembling. When are you leaving Khadoratung?"

"I will leave in the morning," answered Lord Oktar.

"I will ride with you," stated Lord Marak. "I will receive the vows from your people and be present on your estate until the armies arrive. If you are attacked prematurely, I will suffer your fate as well."

"I can ask no more of a commitment from a man than to put his life in danger for me," smiled Lord Oktar. "You have courage, Lord Marak." The Balomar lord stood silent for a moment and then nodded to himself. "I have things to attend to while I am in the capital. I shall talk to you later about our journey tomorrow."

Lord Oktar bowed deeply to the Emperor and left the room. Emperor Bagora chuckled after the door was closed.

"You are indeed a clever man, Lord Marak," he said. "No, more than clever. Your use of the Vows of Service are ingenious, but the truth of your character lies in how you have managed your clans after the vows have been given. I know about the support you received from the clans who swore to you. They stood up for you when everyone else ostracized you. That, Lord Marak, speaks volumes about you. I wish I had that kind of loyalty from my followers. You are the type of Khadoran that inspires ballads."

* * *

Werner led the small group of Jiadin along the base of the Fortung Mountains in Fakara. The sun was high, and the heat

simmered off of the parched earth beneath the horses. Werner was a little glad that the heat was unbearable. The Jiadin had grumbled unmercifully until their throats were parched. Now they only opened their mouths to sip water. They were all quiet except the large one. He appeared to be too stupid to conserve his throat.

"Just where is this paradise?" Klavin bellowed. "Are we to ride all day?"

"Not much farther," Werner replied softly.

"Not much farther?" echoed Klavin. "Did you hear that Gregnic? Not much farther he said. Do you see any paradise? I think he is lying to us."

"At least you don't think he is a spy," Gregnic croaked weakly. "Be quiet and drink some water."

Werner saw the rock shaped like a ram and turned abruptly. "We are almost there," he announced.

The group perked up as their eyes scanned the horizon. Suddenly, one of the riders shouted when they saw the tall trees. Everyone started murmuring as Werner led them through the entrance to the valley. Even Werner was amazed at the improvements since his last visit.

Tall pine trees heralded the entrance to the valley. A bubbling spring fed a creek that flowed into the valley. The group sighed as they gained the coolness of the forest. Werner led them through the trees to an area that was rich in farmland. Mature fields spread away towards the horizon. Herds of wasooki and clova dotted the landscape, and a large stone castle sat in the middle of it all.

Jiadin were everywhere in the valley. They were tending the fields and the herds, cutting down trees, building corrals and buildings. Werner led the group towards the castle as members of the group shouted to Jiadin that they recognized. Waves were exchanged and the spirits of the group soared. The valley was indeed a paradise.

When they arrived at the stone castle, Aakuta was waiting for them. Werner introduced the newest arrivals, and ordered the group to dismount. Werner gathered the horses and tied them to a rail and returned to listen.

"What is this place?" asked Gregnic. "How come we have never heard of it?"

"This is my valley," declared Aakuta. "You are welcome to a piece of it if you agree to my terms. I expect that Werner has explained everything to you?"

"One year of service for a piece of paradise," nodded Gregnic as his eyes continued to take in the sights of the valley.

"What do we have to do?" asked Klavin.

"Whatever I tell you to do," replied Aakuta. "You obey my orders

and you get a permanent home in this valley with enough land to be happy for the rest of your days. If you disobey an order, you will die."

"And who is going to kill us?" quipped Klavin. "You do not look like much of a fighter. We could just take this whole valley for ourselves."

Aakuta pointed a finger at Klavin. The giant flew backwards and slammed to the ground. He groaned loudly as he struggled to get to his feet.

"Do not even think of betraying me," snarled Aakuta. "I have no tolerance for fools."

Gregnic hurried over to Klavin and quickly examined him for injuries. Klavin grumbled loudly, but he refused to meet Aakuta's gaze. He kept his eyes glued to the ground as he made his way back to the group.

"You are pretty scrawny for a warrior," scowled Aakuta as he pointed at Gregnic.

"I am a healer," Gregnic declared.

"A healer? Echoed Aakuta. "Do you know magic?"

"No," Gregnic shook his head. "I bandage wounds and tend to ills as best I can."

"What good is that to me?" snarled Aakuta. "I want an army, not scrawny people."

Gregnic gazed at the fertile valley and knew that he wanted to live there. He had spent too much time wandering Fakara and wondering where his next meal was going to come from. He was determined to make sure that he was not rejected.

"For one thing," Gregnic responded, "I can gather Jiadin much better than Werner."

"What is wrong with Werner?" asked the dark mage.

"He is Khadoran," shrugged Gregnic. "The Jiadin have no use for Khadorans."

"How did you know he was Khadoran?" inquired Aakuta.

"Everything about him is Khadoran," answered Gregnic. "He rides a horse like a Khadoran. He walks and talks like a Khadoran. Even the way he stands erect tells everyone where he is from. Jiadin will avoid him when they see him, unless they think he is easy prey for an ambush."

Aakuta gazed at Werner and nodded. The Khadoran's posture was decidedly different. Werner stood erect as if he was standing before his lord. Aakuta slowly nodded.

"Then you will recruit Jiadin for me, Gregnic," decided Aakuta. "Get them settled, Werner, and return to me."

A pall of worry fell over Werner's face as he led the new arrivals to the work hall. He showed them where they could bunk for the night

and then introduced them to someone who would get them settled. He worried about losing his job as he returned to the castle. As he climbed the stone steps to Aakuta's study, he wondered how he could discredit Gregnic.

"Come in, Werner," Aakuta called before Werner's hand even touched the door.

It always unnerved Werner when Aakuta did that. He opened the door and stepped into Aakuta's study. Aakuta was gazing out the window and did not turn as Werner crossed the floor and sat down.

"Finding Gregnic was excellent," Aakuta said as he turned his head to face Werner. "I have a different task for which you are better suited."

"What is it?" asked Werner.

"I want an estate in Khadora," Aakuta declared.

"You have a lot of gold," frowned Werner, "but not near enough to buy an estate."

"I did not say that I wanted to buy one," snickered Aakuta. "I said that I wanted one. You are to return to Khadora and find one for me. It must be large enough to host our Jiadin friends that you have been bringing here."

"How many of them?" asked Werner.

"Thousands of them," replied the mage. "I don't care what I have to do to obtain the estate, Werner. Just find me one that suits my purpose. You will recognize it when you see it."

Chapter 24

Eastern Frontier

The cornfields were trampled as the soldiers ran through the rows and dove into the long earthen trenches. Some of the soldiers landed on their feet in the trenches, but others tumbled head over heel.

"No, no, no," shouted Cortain Tagoro. "Everybody up and out of the trenches. We will do this over and over until you get it right."

The soldiers grumbled and climbed out of the trenches. Their uniforms presented a rainbow of colors. From the orange and yellow of the Balomar clan to the green and white of the Nordon clan, all of the uniforms were covered in mud. Cortain Tagoro in the black and silver of the Torak clan was the only soldier not dirty.

"The first men into the trenches must immediately bring up their bows to target the enemy," shouted Cortain Tagoro. "I did not see many bows readied that last time. Do you want the Jiadin to follow you into your trenches? If you are not ready for a retreat, that is exactly what they will do. Get back to the skirmish line, and for goodness sake, be mindful of the corn. I understand that during battle the corn will be ruined, but there is no reason to destroy it now. The attack may not be until after harvest, and the paths through the field are already plenty wide."

The soldiers bowed their heads and grumbled under their breath as they trudged back through the field to the imaginary skirmish line.

"Stop!" shouted Lord Marak as he and Lord Oktar approached the exercise.

Everyone froze and turned towards the voice of the Torak lord.

"Tagoro, bring out your corte for a demonstration," ordered Lord Marak. "Let these men rest and see what it is you are trying to teach then."

Cortain Tagoro nodded as he waved the muddy men to the side of the trench opposite the cornfield. The men lined up and watched as a corte of black and silver soldiers marched into the field. They took up a position at the skirmish line, which was barely visible through the rows of corn. Suddenly, Cortain Tagoro blew a whistle.

One third of the Torak soldiers immediately turned and ran for the trench, sheathing their swords and unstrapping their bows as they ran. Another third mimicked the behavior of the first, but only retreated halfway before kneeling and nocking arrows. The last third acted as if they were still fighting some invisible enemy with their

swords. After a short delay, the last third of the Torak soldiers turned and ran for the trench. They ran past their kneeling brethren and switched their swords for bows as they leaped into the trench and turned to fire at the nonexistent enemy. Finally, the men kneeling rose and also scrambled into the trench.

Lord Marak stepped forward and bowed exaggeratedly to the men in the trench. “That is an ordered retreat,” Lord Marak said loudly to the muddy men that were watching. “A retreat is not turning around and running for safety so that you will not be injured. A retreat is moving back to a fortified position in a synchronized manner that provides cover to save your fellow soldiers from getting injured. Always keep your mind on protecting the others. Someone else will be looking out for your welfare. Now get out there and try it again.”

The men of many clans leaped over the trenches and ran towards the skirmish line. The difference this time was one of attitude. The soldiers were excited to duplicate the artistry of the Torak retreat.

“Thank you, Lord Marak,” smiled Cortain Tagoro. “You have a way with words that escapes me.”

“Nonsense, Tagoro,” smiled Lord Marak, “I am just more rested. You have been training these men night and day for over a week now. You should assign someone to take your place for a day and get a healthy amount of sleep. Tiredness dulls the mind.”

“I will, Lord Marak,” saluted the cortain.

“Your troops are the best trained that I have ever seen,” commented Lord Oktar. “Marshal Berman has said as much to me earlier. Your men take their soldiering very seriously.”

“They will live or die depending upon their skill,” shrugged Lord Marak as he turned to head towards the mansion. “Your Marshal Berman has done a fine enough job with your army, considering that your clan is not aggressive, and there has been no real expectation of battle. Times are different now, though. Everyone must be prepared for the battle of their lives.”

“Do you really think we can win this, Lord Marak?” asked the Balomar lord as his marshal joined the group.

“That depends upon what you call winning,” frowned Lord Marak. “What is your goal?”

“To defeat the Glamaraldi,” declared Marshal Berman.

“And after the battle here has been fought,” asked Lord Marak, “do you intend to chase the Glamaraldi back to their estate to finish them off?”

“That is the only way we can win,” answered Marshal Berman.

“That is a recipe for defeat,” Lord Marak shook his head. “We are outnumbered badly.”

“I estimate their strength at five thousand,” argued Marshal

Berman. “We may only have three thousand, but if this training continues, I think we have a chance.”

“Are you aware that the Vessi and Lejune clans also have five thousand warriors?” inquired Lord Marak.

“What do they have to do with this?” asked the marshal. “We are only fighting the Glamaraldi.”

“For now that is true,” nodded Lord Marak, “but will that be true if you attack one of them?”

“You think the others would come to the aid of the Glamaraldi?” asked Lord Oktar.

“I do,” asserted Lord Marak. “Each of those estates has five thousand Jiadin warriors. It is not coincidence that this is so. Those foreign troops have been arranged by someone who wants to see Khadora crumble. If their plan is endangered, they will all join forces.”

“Then we are doomed in spite of all of this preparation,” sighed Lord Oktar.

“Not necessarily,” smiled Lord Marak. “The Lord Council has refused to get involved out here because there has been no dispute brought to their attention. My plan is to successfully repel the Glamaraldi attack and then appeal to the Lords’ Council to send troops.”

“So we are to hold the borders of this estate and nothing more?” questioned the marshal.

“That is the plan,” nodded Lord Marak.

“Surely the Glamaraldi will call for help if they understand what we intend to do,” retorted Marshal Berman. “Holding off the second attack may be harder than defeating the initial one.”

“Quite true,” agreed Lord Marak. “They will be more wary the second time around. That is why I intend to evacuate your citizens after the first attack.”

“Evacuate?” echoed Lord Oktar. “To where?”

“Somewhere where they will be safe from battle,” replied Lord Marak. “Look at the number of clans represented here. Each of those clans will host some of your people until it is safe to return.”

“Will they have an estate to return to?” questioned Lord Oktar.

“Either they will,” declared Lord Marak, “or we will help them rebuild it. It is not this land that holds the heritage of the Balomar clan, Lord Oktar. The heritage lives within your people. It is them that you must safeguard.”

“Then why don’t we just evacuate the people and let the Glamaraldi run over the estate?” asked Marshal Berman.

“There are other clans in danger, Marshal,” answered Lord Marak. “We must find a way to halt these Jiadin and their Khadoran hosts. We need a provocation to bring to the Lords’ Council.”

“What of the soldiers’ families?” asked Lord Oktar. “You stand ready to evacuate my people, yet you continue to bring in wagonloads of women from your own estates. Surely the soldiers’ wives should have remained at home.”

Lord Marak smiled as he understood that Lord Oktar thought the wagonloads of mages being brought in were wives of the soldiers. He did not care to correct the Balomar lord.

“All noncombatants will be moved to safety,” smiled Lord Marak.

* * *

Werner rode into the Valley of the Ram just after sunrise. The bright sun was full in his face as he came out of the pine forest, and it took a few moments for his eyes to adjust. When he was finally able to look at the valley, he was amazed at what he saw. Thousands of Jiadin warriors covered the landscape. Fields of every imaginable crop flourished and were ready for harvesting. Great herds of wasooki and clova overflowed the pens. Wooden buildings rose in every direction. It was indeed a miracle valley. He rode straight for the castle and dismounted. He raced up the stairs to Aakuta’s study and walked through the open door.

“Tell me of my new estate,” Aakuta said without turning to acknowledge Werner’s presence.

“I have not been able to find one,” Werner reported. “I looked everywhere and nothing is available.”

Aakuta turned slowly and glared at Werner. The Khadoran’s body began to shake as he stared at the two eye-slits in Aakuta’s hood. The slits appeared to smoke, and Werner was sure there was nothing but two burning orbs behind them.

“Nothing?” scowled Aakuta. “That is not acceptable. Why have you failed me?”

“Failed?” croaked Werner. “I looked everywhere. There are no estates for sale in all of Khadora. I truly tried, Aakuta. I almost got caught several times by my old clan, the Kamaril. You know they would kill me on sight, even if old man Druck is dead. I have risked my life to find an estate, but there are none.”

“Druck is dead?” questioned the dark mage. “How?”

“I am not sure how,” answered Werner as he tried to calm his shaking body. “It was not by foul means. Some think his heart just stopped.”

“Wasn’t the boy his only son?” asked Aakuta.

“Yes,” Werner nodded. “Yargot is all that is left of the Kamaril family.”

“Who will run the Kamaril clan now,” questioned Aakuta. “Surely the boy is too young?”

“He is too young,” agreed Werner. “All of the advisors of the clan

will meet and choose a successor to rule until the boy comes of age."

"The advisors will choose?" frowned Aakuta. "Does not the boy have a say in the matter?"

"Oh he does," nodded Werner. "He ultimately will chose the ruler, but the advisors will decide who they should present to the boy. Yargot can refuse and the advisors will meet again and choose someone else."

"Can the boy just name the ruler?" asked Aakuta.

"I suppose so," shrugged Werner, "but I have never heard of such a thing. Why would he not take advantage of his advisors?"

"Because they do not know what is best for the boy," grinned the mage. "Get me Gregnic."

Werner ran out of the study. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he placed his back to the wall and tried to calm himself. He had thought that Aakuta would kill him for failing to find an estate. He did not like the feeling at all. When he was finally composed, he searched for the Jiadin healer and took him to see the dark mage.

"The time has come for your people to earn their keep, Gregnic," stated Aakuta as he pointed to a large map he had placed on the table. "We are going here," he said as he pointed to a spot on the map. "This will be our new home for a while."

"In Khadora?" questioned Gregnic. "The men will not like that."

"They will not be forced to go," smiled Aakuta. "Make a list of each who refuses to live up to their agreement. I will kill them tonight. Perhaps we can make a sport of it for the amusement of the others."

"Kill them?" gulped Gregnic. "They will go. I just meant that they would not be happy about it."

"I care little for their happiness," scowled the dark mage. "They made a bargain. I intend to see them live up to it. I want you to organize their trip to my new estate. They will travel only at night. Nobody is to see them. Is that clear?"

"Nobody is to see them," nodded Gregnic. "We can do that."

"Good," smiled Aakuta. "Today and tomorrow they may rest. Tomorrow night they begin their travels. I want that list to be accurate, Gregnic. Any man who refuses to serve, as agreed to, will suffer greatly. Make sure that the men learn of my words."

* * *

Lord Chenowith of the Walkan clan sat in the Emperor's office.

"You are asking me to commit troops to battle, Father," Lord Chenowith frowned, "but I have no alliance with Lord Oktar or Lord Marak. Frankly, your request confuses me. A border dispute on the eastern frontier is no business of the Walkan clan. Even if it were, I would not commit troops until a provocation had occurred. That is the

way in Khadora, and you know it."

"I am fully aware of the law, son," replied Emperor Bagora, "but I also know right from wrong. The clans of the frontier are as much a part of Khadora as any other, even a founding clan. Are we not a government of all of the clans?"

"We are," sighed Lord Chenowith. "I have never known you to stray from the law in the past. It is your hallmark. Why have you changed your views on this?"

"I am privy to information that I cannot repeat," explained the Emperor. "What I can tell you is that Khadora is in serious trouble. Why do you think Lord Marak is out there to defend a small clan? Do you think he likes to stick his nose in other people's business just because he is curious? He understands the gravity of the situation, as do I. I can only ask that you put your trust in me. Your armies are very much needed."

"You speak of this Lord Marak as if he is some sort of Khadoran savior," sighed Lord Chenowith. "All that I have heard about him is that he is too young to rule."

"Bah," scowled the Emperor. "Wash those thoughts out of your mind. Those are the words of men with no vision. Lord Marak may well be a savior to Khadora. If any man in this country deserves to sit in this chair that I occupy, it is him. Never forget that. His age has nothing to do with his abilities."

"I have never heard you speak so strongly in favor of anyone," frowned Lord Chenowith. "Not even me."

Emperor Bagora sighed heavily and looked at his son. He shook his head sadly. "You know that I think the world of you, Chenowith," the Emperor said fondly. "You are a far better man than I ever was at your age. Your people adore you, and with good reason. You are kind, yet firm. Your honesty is beyond reproach, and you are an extremely generous lord. I do not mean to hurt your feelings with this talk of Lord Marak. You are well qualified to be Emperor of Khadora, but you are not aware of what is going on in this world. There is only one man who is aware. That is Lord Marak."

"I thought you knew what he knows," frowned Lord Chenowith.

"I know but a fraction of what he knows," confessed the Emperor. "He stands today with a minor frontier lord to battle the Glamaraldi, but there is a greater threat than even them. I have learned a great deal from Lord Marak, but there is much more to learn. My spies have uncovered more information that Lord Marak only hinted at."

"Why is this Lord Marak so secretive?" asked Lord Chenowith. "He should be eager to share information with the Emperor, particularly one who is so taken with him."

"He has shared enough with me that his life would be forfeit if I

told anyone what I know," replied the Emperor. "He has a great reason for his secrecy. He knows things that would bring shame to all Khadorans. You well know how some of your fellow lords would react to such information."

"He cannot possibly know anything that would bring shame to me," Lord Chenowith said adamantly. "I am proud of the life I live."

"Would you be so proud if you found out that this grand life you live is founded on the misery of others?" accused the Emperor.

Lord Chenowith stared at the Emperor for a long time. He knew his father as the most respected man in all of Khadora, yet Chenowith could see the agony of guilt in the Emperor's eyes. It was not a personal guilt, Chenowith realized after a few moments. It was a collective guilt. Lord Chenowith searched his mind for anything in the histories of Khadora that could possibly cause such pain, but he found nothing.

"How can you ask this of me, Father?" Lord Chenowith finally asked. "You have taught me to live according to our laws. Now you ask me to break them."

"No," the Emperor shook his head. "I cannot ask you to break them, although I would like to. I do not request that you send your armies into battle in defense of the Balomar clan. I ask that you send your armies to be ready for battle. Lord Marak is expecting the Glamaraldi to provoke a crisis by attacking the Balomar. The problem as I see it, is that once that provocation takes place, our armies will be too far away to help."

"So you want me to send armies all the way to the eastern frontier, to wait for a potential battle?" questioned Lord Chenowith. "What are they to live on? How long shall they wait? You must be specific in what you are asking me to do."

"I cannot be more specific," sighed the Emperor. "Perhaps I am wrong to even ask such a sacrifice from you."

"Don't do that to me, Father," scowled Lord Chenowith. "Now you are making me feel guilty for not obeying your request without question. That is not fair."

"I am sorry," apologized Emperor Bagora. "That was not my intention. I am frustrated by my inability to do what I know is right. The fault does not lie with you."

Lord Chenowith nodded with understanding. "If our situations were reversed, Father," asked the lord of the Walkan clan, "What would you do?"

"If I knew what I know," shrugged the Emperor, "I would march my armies onto the Balomar estate and ask Lord Marak where they should take up positions."

"You feel that strongly about this?" Lord Chenowith asked as his

eyebrow rose.

"I do," nodded the Emperor, "but I am wrong to ask you to do the same. It was a mistake to make such a request and then refuse to tell you my reasons."

"You have that much faith in this Lord Marak?" inquired Lord Chenowith. "Faith enough to violate the law?"

"I would not violate the law," the Emperor shook his head. "It would not be necessary."

"Not necessary?" frowned Lord Chenowith. "Maybe you did not understand me. I was talking about you committing Walkan troops to fight a war before any provocation has been registered with the Lords' Council."

"I understand the question," assured the Emperor.

"How could you do that without breaking the law?" questioned Lord Chenowith. "It is not possible."

"It is possible," sighed the Emperor. "I would swear Vows of Service to Lord Marak."

Lord Chenowith's mouth fell open as he stared at the Emperor of Khadora. He shook his head as if to clear his ears, but he knew he had not misheard his father. For several long minutes, the silence remained unbroken. Father and son sat and stared at each other across the large desk. Finally, the son stood up and bowed to the Emperor.

"You have given me much to dwell upon," Lord Chenowith said formally. "I am afraid that I must think upon your request for some time before I can properly answer you."

"I understand," nodded the Emperor as he reached into his desk drawer and retrieved a locked metal box. "Take this with you to the home of the Walkan clan. It contains some of my historical research. Perhaps when I step down as Emperor, I will wish to review it."

"The only way you would step down is if you are too feeble to eat," smiled Lord Chenowith, "but I will do as you ask. Your room at the estate has been preserved, as it will be for all time."

"You are a fine son, Chenowith, smiled the Emperor. "I could not have asked for more than what I have received in you. May your sons turn out half as good as you have. Tell the door guards when you leave that I am retiring for the evening."

Lord Chenowith nodded and bowed to the Emperor. He exited the Emperor's office and delivered the message before heading for the staircase.

"You heard Lord Chenowith," smiled one of the Imperial guards as he addressed the other guard. "You are on your own now. I am off for some food and a night on the town."

"Don't drink all the ale," quipped the guard that had to remain on duty.

The off-duty guard laughed and waved as he walked towards the stairs. He walked down one flight and stood for a moment as his eyes scanned the empty corridors. Satisfied that he was not being watched, the soldier moved softly to a suite that was reserved for Imperial guests. He opened the door and slipped into the dark room. He stole silently across the room and sat in a large leather chair next to the empty fireplace. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he drifted into a light sleep.

Hours later the Imperial soldier woke up. He stood and stretched and then walked to the doors to the balcony. He quietly opened the doors and stared up at the sky to determine that he had slept for about four hours. Nodding to himself, the soldier slid on a pair of gloves. He walked onto the balcony and gazed across the facade of the Imperial Palace to see if anyone else was using a balcony. Seeing no other people, the soldier moved to the railing and gazed downward. The gardens were empty and the great field beyond was empty of soldiers. He had not expected to see any soldiers as no lords were in residence at the moment.

With an inward smile, the soldier turned to face the building. He eased himself to the far right-hand side of the balcony as his gloved hand reached over the railing and into the dark corner formed by the balcony meeting the facade of the palace. His hand wrapped around the rope hanging there and he held onto it as he lifted his legs over the railing. He grabbed the rope with both hands and started pulling himself upward. Within a few moments, the Imperial soldier was standing on the Emperor's balcony.

He opened his pack and extracted a sheathed knife. He carefully removed the knife from the sheath, being careful not to rub the blade against the leather. His eyes squinted as he tried to examine the blade in the darkness. He finally shrugged, content that the poison would not have worn off in the sheath. The soldier tried the doors to the Emperor's bedroom and found them locked. He removed one glove and ran his fingers along the seam of the twin doors. He grinned as he felt the thin wire. With a slow deliberate upward motion, the soldier pulled on the wire until he heard the click of the door unlocking.

The Imperial soldier released the wire and put his glove back on. He eased the doors open and stepped into the Emperor's bedroom. With a malicious grin, the assassin stepped next to the bed and plunged the poisoned knife into the Emperor's throat. Emperor Bagora's eyes flashed open to stare at his assassin. His mouth opened to scream, but he could not. As his hand frantically sought the hanging cord that would summon help, the Emperor died.

Chapter 25

Provocation

Lord Marak sat astride his horse atop a large hill on the Balomar estate. The men of Botal's squad formed a protective ring around the Torak lord as Botal, Halman, and Gunta joined Lord Marak in watching the battle.

"Their charge is faltering," remarked Botal. "After all of the probing that they have done, I would not expect that."

"It is neither the terrain nor the stiff resistance that is causing their faltering," responded Lord Marak. "It is confusion. We had wondered if the Glamaraldi spies had discovered the various clans that have assembled here. It is now obvious that they had not."

"You mean that they are confused by the uniforms?" questioned Halman.

"Exactly," nodded Lord Marak. "They are just now discovering that they are up against more than just the Balomar clan."

"The northern group is pulling back," pointed Gunta.

Lord Marak turned slightly to look in the direction that Gunta was pointing. He saw the Jiadin warriors, who were dressed as Glamaraldi soldiers, retreating. He slowly scanned the battlefield from the area of the retreat towards the south. About one third of the attackers had turned and fled from the battle, but the other two thirds were still attacking.

"You have to admire the way the Jiadin use their bows while on horseback," Lord Marak commented. "They are much better at it than we are."

"Much of Khadoran fighting is on foot in forests and estates," shrugged Botal. "Fakarans fight over the open range. Theirs is not so much a fight for territory as it is one of elimination."

"True," nodded Lord Marak. "I wonder what type of combat the war against the great evil will require? I wish we could learn more about what is to come."

"Perhaps we should start training units to fight like the Fakarans do," suggested Halman.

"Or have Fakarans fighting by our side," mused Lord Marak.

"Tagoro's group is turning the tide," Botal said excitedly. "Their center is collapsing. They are retreating."

"This was just a probe," sighed Lord Marak.

"Just a probe?" echoed Botal. "Five thousand Jiadin charging you

is not just a probe."

"It is to the Jiadin," corrected Lord Marak. "The tribes of Fakara did not engage much in all out warfare. If they can crush their opponent in one easy sweep, they will do so. If they cannot, they will probe until they find a weakness. Obviously, the other estates that have fallen so far did not present any challenge to the Jiadin. They had no need to probe. This time it is different."

"Their southern flank is breaking off," noted Halman. "If this is a probe, when will the next one be?"

"We have no way of knowing," shrugged Lord Marak. "That is the bad part about defending. We must always be ready for the attack. It could come at any time."

"I would prefer attacking," frowned Gunta. "Let them remain on guard for a while."

"I would love to take the fight to them," smiled Lord Marak, "but not this time. In this battle we get to be the defenders. At least we now have the provocation that we have waited for. Botal, I want an air mage positioned on this hill at all times, night and day. Let's return to the mansion and prepare for a trip to Khadoratung. Lord Oktar finally has a provocation to present to the Lords' Council."

"I have already taken the liberty," grinned Botal as he pointed to an air mage riding up the hill. "I knew you would want this hill manned once you saw the view from it. I left a note for an air mage to join us."

"Ophia," nodded Lord Marak as he turned to see the young woman riding up the hill. "She will do fine."

"Lord Marak," greeted Ophia. "I have been looking all over for you since dawn. Your note was not discovered until just recently."

"Why are you searching for me?" Lord Marak asked with concern in his voice.

"We have had messages from everywhere this morning," explained the mage. "Latril sent one from the Neju estate. She says the Emperor has been assassinated. Kaylee from the Nordon estate says the same, but adds that you must travel swiftly to Khadoratung. The Lords' Council is to meet to choose a new Emperor. Lord Marshal Yenga asked for a report of the conditions here. He wants to talk to as soon as practical."

"Our journey to Khadoratung must be swift," Lord Marak said softly as the impact of the news caused him to press his lips tightly together. "Botal, your squad will be my escort. Ophia, I want you to arrange fresh horses for us along the way. We will be riding nonstop to Khadoratung."

* * *

Lord Patel rode through the streets of Khadoratung on his way to

the Imperial Palace. Bells all over the city were ringing mournfully as they announced the death of the Emperor. The lord of the Nordon clan watched the people moving about the city. There was sadness in their faces. Emperor Bagora had been well liked by the people. Lord Patel had to admit that Bagora had ruled in an even-handed and fair manner. He had never favored one clan over another, and he always seemed able to diffuse tensions when they arose. Lord Patel sighed heavily as the Imperial Palace came into view.

The thought that kept intruding into Lord Patel's mind was the message that he had received before the sun had arisen. It had clearly stated that Emperor Bagora had been assassinated, but there had been no mention of catching the assassin. Lord Patel could not imagine how an assassin could escape when the Imperial Palace was empty. It was possible during the days of the Assembly of Lords due to the fact that thousands of people were milling about in the palace, but now the palace should be fairly empty. One would expect the assassin to stand out easily. The implications of an escape troubled the Nordon lord. He could think of only one way that the assassin could defy recognition, and that was that he had to belong in the Imperial Palace in the first place. The assassin had to be an Imperial soldier.

The lectain leading Lord Patel's escort started shouting commands as the Imperial Palace came into view. He ordered two cortes to proceed to the field behind the palace. The third corte dismounted and handed their horses off to those heading behind the palace. The lectain formed the third corte around Lord Patel and led the way along the path to one of the doors. The Imperial guards manning the door opened it immediately, and the Nordon group entered the palace.

"One squad with me to the Lords' Council Chamber," stated Lord Patel. "The other two squads are to prepare the Nordon quarters for a stay of unknown duration."

The lectain caught the attention of the three squad leaders and indicated what their tasks would be. He then turned and led the escort up the stairs to the Lords' Council Chamber. When they reached the door to the chamber, Lord Kiamesh was standing outside giving directions to his escort.

"I see you have just arrived as well," greeted Lord Patel.

"Just a moment ago," nodded Lord Kiamesh as the escorts of both lords moved away to the room where escorts waited. "Are you casting your lot with Lord Mirakotto?"

"You mean for Emperor?" frowned Lord Patel. "Isn't it little early to be asking such a question? We have not even heard the nominations yet."

"Is there any doubt that Lord Mirakotto will nominate himself?" retorted Lord Kiamesh. "Becoming Emperor is the only reason for his

existence, at least if you think like him."

"I will not vote for anyone before the nominations are made and discussion is held," declared Lord Patel. "That certainly won't be today. I know that Lord Marak is far out of the city."

"If you and Lord Marak join with me," Lord Kiamesh said conspiratorially, "we can keep Mirakotto from assuming the throne."

"And who then would we vote for?" Lord Patel asked suspiciously. "For you perhaps?"

"You mistake my motives, Lord Patel," Kiamesh replied with feigned offense. "I have been the lone voice against Lord Mirakotto in this council. You and Lord Quilo claim to be independent, but you side with Mirakotto more often than not. Woton and Garic were, of course, his ideological slaves. With Woton gone, and Marak on the council, we might actually have a chance of electing a decent Emperor. It does not have to be me, but I would like to be considered. My point is, as long as Woton was here, we would not even have the choice. Mirakotto would automatically claim the throne. Now the vote would be tied with three of us sticking together. We can then discuss the nominees, if you will at least veto Mirakotto."

"I will not vote until there has been full discussion," promised Lord Patel "So, if you are asking if I will vote against a move by Mirakotto to force this issue with him as the only candidate, the answer is yes."

"Excellent," grinned Lord Kiamesh as he opened the door to the chamber for Lord Patel.

Lord Mirakotto, Lord Quilo, and Lord Garic were already seated at the table. The two late arrivals walked to the table and sat down.

"As you are all aware," Lord Mirakotto began, "the Emperor was assassinated last night in his bed. The purpose of this meeting of the Lords' Council is to appoint a successor. It is my turn to lead the meeting, and I will begin by nominating myself for Emperor."

"How convenient," Lord Kiamesh said under his breath.

"Lord Mirakotto," said Lord Patel, "the entire Lords' Council is not present. Rather than start the proceedings to replace the Emperor, why don't you enlighten us on how the Emperor was killed, and how the assassin has managed to escape detection."

"I see enough members here to accomplish our goals," retorted Lord Mirakotto. "I was not informed that you thought so highly of Lord Marak that you would seek to delay things."

"How I feel about Lord Marak has no bearing on my objection," countered Lord Patel. "My point is that only five seats are occupied, not six. This council must adjourn until the missing member arrives."

"This is why I warned about having members from outside the Imperial Valley," snarled Lord Mirakotto. "The government cannot

afford to wait for a week while our boy lord stumbles his way here from the frontier."

"But we must have all members here," insisted Lord Patel.

"That is where you are wrong, Patel," snapped Lord Mirakotto. "The law makes an exception for when a lord is sufficiently far away that his presence is not expected within a reasonable amount of time. If we were discussing a mere border dispute, we could wait a week, but we are not. We are performing our duty to choose a successor to the post of Emperor so that the government of Khadora is not rudderless. This is an urgent matter that cannot wait."

"I disagree," declared Lord Patel. "The more urgent the matter, the more important it is to ensure that all members are seated for the discussion."

"Disagree all you wish, Lord Patel," smirked Lord Mirakotto. "I am running this meeting, and I am going to proceed. Now, if there are no further nominations, I move that the voting has begun. I will vote for myself."

"I will not suffer this nonsense," snapped Lord Patel as he rose. "You may not have to wait for Lord Marak, but you will have to wait for me. I shall not enter this room again until all six members are available. I will not be far away. See if you can get around that rule."

Lord Patel stormed out of the room, and Lord Mirakotto shook his head. Lord Kiamesh rose and sighed as he turned and headed for the door.

"Lord Kiamesh," Lord Mirakotto said through clenched teeth, "kindly take your seat. There is a vote underway."

"The members are not all present, in case you missed Lord Patel walking out," shrugged Lord Kiamesh. "You must adjourn the meeting,"

"You are wrong," smiled Lord Mirakotto. "There is already a vote underway. If a lord leaves the chamber during a vote, he will be marked as having abstained."

"What are you talking about?" questioned Lord Kiamesh. "Do you make these rules up?"

"Hardly," smirked Lord Mirakotto as he slid an open book across the table. "I do, however, spend time familiarizing myself with the law. Read it for yourself."

Lord Kiamesh turned and bent down to read the page of the book. He slammed it shut and slid it powerfully across the table towards Lord Mirakotto.

"You want my vote?" taunted Lord Kiamesh. "Very well. I vote for myself."

"Alas," grinned Lord Mirakotto, "you cannot. The time for nomination was before the voting began. You can vote for me, or you

can vote for me."

"I will vote for you, Mirakotto," offered Lord Garic.

"Well, I won't," Lord Kiamesh said adamantly as he stormed towards the door. "You will never get my vote. I will abstain."

The door slammed shut, and Lord Mirakotto turned to gaze at Lord Quilo.

"Your vote, Lord Quilo?" prompted Lord Mirakotto.

"You have made some enemies today, Lord Mirakotto," frowned Lord Quilo. "You should rethink your posture on this."

"I am just finding out who my true friends are," shrugged Lord Mirakotto. "With two abstentions and one absence, I hardly need your vote, but I would like it."

Lord Quilo stared at Lord Mirakotto for a long time. Finally, he nodded his acceptance of the inevitable.

"You have my vote," declared Lord Quilo.

* * *

The Balomar sentries shouted as they watched the Glamaraldi army approach under a flag of truce. A soldier ran along the long drive from the road to the mansion. He leaped up the stairs and raced into the meeting room where Lord Oktar was talking with Marshal Berman.

"A Glamaraldi talking party is at the gates," gasped the soldier. "Should we let them in?"

"How many in the party?" asked Marshal Berman.

"A single corte," reported the soldier.

"Where is Lord Marak?" asked Lord Oktar.

"He has not been around all morning," answered Marshal Berman. "I heard that he was atop the great hill watching the enemy."

"Let the talking party in," decided Lord Oktar. "If there is more than a corte, close the gates quickly. Then find Lord Marak and have him get here immediately."

"I will send some men to line the drive," stated Marshal Berman. "I do not trust the Glamaraldi."

"That is wise of you," agreed Lord Oktar as he rolled up the maps of the estate. "Return right away."

The soldier caught his breath and ran out of the room and exited the mansion. He ran back along the drive to the gates. When he arrived he climbed up on the gates to estimate the strength of the enemy. He estimated them to be no more than a corte. He turned and saw soldiers running to line the drive. He climbed down and unlocked the gates.

Lord Yungis of the Glamaraldi clan nodded to his men and his cortain led the escort onto the Balamor estate. They rode slowly along the drive as Lord Yungis turned his head and viewed everything that

he could see. By the time he reached the mansion, the Glamaraldi lord had noted the changes since his last visit. He was impressed. Lord Yungis was escorted into the meeting room while his troops stood in formation in front of the mansion.

"What do you want?" Lord Oktar asked abruptly when the Glamaraldi lord entered the room.

"An end to this conflict," smiled Lord Yungis. "I will allow you and your people to leave the estate without harm. You have two days."

"Leave the estate?" echoed Lord Oktar in disbelief. "Why in the world would I leave my home?"

"You must realize that my armies are vastly superior to yours," declared Lord Yungis. "If you do not take my offer, I will have to crush you like a fresh grape."

"We will never leave," declared Lord Oktar. "Your army is full of Jiadin that will turn on you the moment you turn your back. It is you who should be afraid of your provocation."

"My provocation?" spat Lord Yungis. "Your estate is full of troops from many clans. This is clearly a provocation to the Glamaraldi. Your only reason for such troops is to wage war on me."

"If that is your concern," smiled Lord Oktar, "then we shall call for a mediator of the Lords' Council. Let them decide who caused the first provocation. There is no reason for the bloodshed to continue."

"The Lords' Council would surely side with me," bluffed Lord Yungis. "Why should I waste my time with them?"

"To save your clan," Lord Marak stated as he entered the room.

Lord Yungis spun and glared at Lord Marak. "Who are you to enter this private conversation?" he snapped.

"I am Lord Marak of the Torak clan," stated the Torak lord, "and I am a member of the Lords' Council. Your Jiadin troops invaded this estate this morning. I am demanding that you rid your armies of the foreigners, and send them home. If you do so, peace will be restored here."

"So you are Lord Marak," snarled Lord Yungis. "Your position on the Lords' Council does not impress me. Even a member of the Lords' Council must obey the law. Your gathering of clans here is a violation of the law and a provocation to the Glamaraldi clan. I just might appeal to the Emperor and have your clan disbanded."

"Nice try," grinned Lord Marak. "I see two problems with your approach. The first is that you were not aware of any clans residing here until you attacked this morning. Therefore, there was no provocation before your attack. The second is that I have already spoken with the Emperor about my presence here. No law has been violated, and the presence of other clans here has the Emperor's

blessing. Your attack this morning is another matter. You have clearly attacked this estate without provocation. You will adhere to my terms or face ruin. My terms are simple. Disband your foreign armies and send them back to Fakara."

"I don't think so, Lord Marak," spat Lord Yungis. "You have no idea what you are starting. You will rue the day you spoke to me like this."

"I don't think so, Lord Yungis," Lord Marak said with a steely voice. "Bigger lords than you have tried to nip my toes. When you are in Khadoratung next week, I will introduce you to them."

"And why would I be in Khadoratung?" questioned Lord Yungis.

"For the Assembly of Lords meeting," declared Lord Marak. "There is a need to elect another member to the Lords' Council. Have you not been advised yet?"

"No," snarled Lord Yungis. "Nor do I care. The Lords' Council means nothing to me. Two days, Lord Oktar," he snapped as he turned towards the Balomar lord. "You have two days."

Lord Yungis turned and stormed out of the room. Everyone remained silent until they heard the front door of the estate close.

"What was that about a meeting of the Assembly of Lords?" asked Marshal Berman. "We just had one."

"The Emperor has been assassinated," Lord Marak informed them. "I did not wish to share that information with Lord Yungis, but that will require another meeting of the Assembly of Lords. In fact, I came down off the hill to prepare for that trip. There will also be a meeting of the Lords' Council that I must attend. You should be ready to leave within the hour, Lord Oktar."

"We are going to leave in the middle of the war?" asked Lord Oktar. "That does not make sense."

"It makes perfect sense," explained Lord Marak. "We have the provocation we need to call upon the Lords' Council."

"But Lord Yungis will never go before the Lords' Council," argued Lord Oktar. "You heard his despicable contempt for the government. No ruling can stop this now."

"We do not need him there," declared Lord Marak. "We will not be asking for a negotiated settlement. We will be asking for troops. Lord Yungis does not care for a fair fight. That is why he amassed five thousand Jiadin warriors. We took him by surprise this morning, and now he is worried. He came here to scare you into leaving your home."

"Why would he think that we would leave?" asked Lord Oktar.

"He doesn't," said Lord Marak. "It was a desperate attempt to bully you. Because the odds are not so lopsided in his favor, he will now call upon the other Jiadin clans to come to his aid."

“How many more Jiadin will come?” asked Marshal Berman.

“Instead of five thousand,” frowned Lord Marak, “we will be facing fifteen to twenty thousand.”

“Mercy!” exclaimed Lord Oktar. “Maybe we should give up.”

“No,” Lord Marak stated adamantly. “Never give in to such bullying tactics. We will present your case to the Lords’ Council and return with enough troops to push the Jiadin back into Fakara.”

* * *

A cold raw wind suddenly burst through the trees around the gate of the Kamaril estate. The night guards felt a chill envelope their body as they sat near the gate. One of them wrapped his arms around his body to ward off the chill, but it passed quickly.

The sentries outside the front door of the mansion were sleepy and anxious for the dawn to approach so that they would be relieved and could go to bed. One of them pointed and remarked about the oddity of the sudden cloud of mist rolling along the drive towards the mansion. They watched it approach with a strange combination of apprehension and curiosity. All too soon it was all around them, thick and opaque. A click reverberated through the air, but it was directionless, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. The soft sound of a door closing caused one of them to spin around and look towards the front door to the mansion, but the fog was too thick to see even those few feet.

Inside the Kamaril mansion wind chimes suddenly tingled, their light tinny tones drifting aimlessly through the air. The stairs creaked softly and a chilled wind swept through the rooms, gaining access through every crack and under every door. The sleeping inhabitants subconsciously pulled the covers tighter around themselves or curled their bodies into balls to keep warm.

One particular inhabitant, young Yargot, son of the late Lord Druck, tossed fitfully. Strange dreams invaded his sleep, nightmares really. Once again his body was covered in oozing boils, but this time they were slowly exploding one at a time. Each explosion brought forth a wave of incredible pain. Each wave was more terrifying than the one before. Suddenly, Yargot sat up and opened his mouth to scream.

Yargot opened his eyes to the darkness of the night. He could not see anything, but he felt a hand covering his mouth. His arms rose to claw at the restraint.

“Be quiet,” demanded a cold voice. “You have made a vow, and I am here to see you make good on it.”

The hand moved away from his mouth, and suddenly the room was illuminated. He turned and saw the shape of a man lighting a candle. He stared at the apparition in black for a long moment before

he realized who he was looking at. A shiver raced down his spine as he recalled the nightmare.

"Do you remember your vow?" Aakuta asked in a sinister voice.

Yargot nodded his head silently as the dark mage stepped closer to the bed.

"Do you remember the vow?" Aakuta asked again.

"I remember," gulped the frightened boy. "I owe you a debt."

"And I am here to collect," declared Aakuta. "You may pay the debt, or pay the consequences. Which will it be?"

"I will pay the debt," the boy said quickly. "What do you want?"

"You will name me as your regent," demanded the dark mage. "I will rule the Kamaril until I tire of it. Do you understand?"

"I understand," the boy nodded exaggeratedly.

"Good," smiled Aakuta. "You will do this at first light. I will arrive here an hour after that. I expect everyone to bow before me when I arrive. If they do not, I will consider your debt not paid."

"They will all bow before you," promised Yargot. "All of them. I promise."

Chapter 26

Appeal for Justice

Lord Chenowith walked into his father's suite and closed the door behind him. He stood silently for a long time as his eyes scanned the room. Memories flooded the mind of the lord of the Walkan clan as he pictured his father sitting behind the large desk near the windows. Tears sprang unbidden from his eyes as he heard his father's laughter. Time ceased to matter as Lord Chenowith watched his father explaining the finances of the clan to the young boy sitting before the desk. The young boy was eager to learn and idolized Lord Bagora. They both laughed as they shared some private humor. Tears flowed down Lord Chenowith's face, and he closed his eyes tightly.

When he opened his eyes, the vision was gone. The suite was empty except for Lord Chenowith himself. He wiped the tears from his face and walked to the desk. He sat in the chair that he had sat in as a boy and stared across the desk at the empty chair on the other side.

"Your time had not yet come," Lord Chenowith said to the empty chair. "There was too much life left in your bones. Did you know when we spoke that night that your life was in danger? You could have told me. I would have broken every rule to save you."

"Perhaps you knew that," Lord Chenowith said after a long silent pause. "You always knew what I would do long before I did it. You always knew everything."

Lord Chenowith closed his eyes and put his head down on the desk. The coolness of the wood radiated through his head and brought a surreal calmness with it. He sat immobile for a long time. Suddenly he raised his head and opened his eyes. His turned and stared at the metal box his father had asked him to bring home. He knew that Bagora would frown upon him opening it, but Lord Chenowith couldn't help but wonder if Bagora had written anything that would pinpoint his assassin. His father did, after all, always know everything.

Lord Chenowith rose and walked to the metal box. He picked it up and held it as if weighing his actions. With determination and anger at the death of his father, Lord Chenowith placed the box on the desk and drew his knife. He nervously attacked the lock with his knife. The lock could not withstand the assault. It was never meant to. The lock was merely a reminder to anyone who would peer into another man's belongings. Lord Chenowith did not care. He would never have done such a thing while his father lived, but things felt

different now. The box might contain a clue to the identity of the assassin, and Lord Chenowith vowed to avenge his father's death.

Lord Chenowith opened the box and peered into it. The box was stuffed with papers. Lord Chenowith recognized some of them as Imperial decrees that should have been deposited with the Imperial archives. He frowned at the thought that his father had taken the documents out of the Imperial Palace. Picking up the box he moved to sit behind the desk, but he halted as he began to sit. He stood there for a few moments before walking back around the desk to sit where he had before. Even after Emperor Bagora's death, it felt disrespectful to sit in his father's chair.

Lord Chenowith started lifting documents out of the box and reading them. He saw that most of the Imperial decrees dealt with an extensive network of spies. Names, locations, and compensation amounts indicated a spy network that was far vaster than anything he could have imagined. Lord Chenowith's eyes grew wide as he read the secret documents. It suddenly became very clear why the Emperor had not entrusted the documents to the Imperial archive. Emperor Bagora had been spying on everyone. Members of the Lords' Council, members of the Imperial troops, and even individual clan lords, Bagora had spies watching them all.

At the bottom of the box was a small journal. Lord Chenowith took it and held it for a moment before he opened it. He felt as if he were intruding into his father's inner mind as he started reading the daily log of random thoughts, meetings, and conclusions. Hours later, Lord Chenowith had to light a new candle. He paused and stared out the window of his father's study. He saw that the dawn was only hours away. He returned to his chair and sighed as he delved back into the journal. He was beginning to see the life of an Emperor in a way that few men could ever understand.

* * *

Lord Marak and Lord Oktar arrived at the Imperial Palace. Already other lords and their escorts were converging on the capital in preparation for the Assembly of Lords that would begin the following day. It had already become clear to Lord Marak that Khadora had a new Emperor. Word of the rise of Lord Mirakotto had met them halfway in their rush to Khadoratung. Lord Marak did not dwell upon the news. His mission was to secure help from the Lords' Council for the coming battles with the Jiadin.

They entered the Imperial Palace. Botal led the Torak squad to the Torak quarters while the Balomar squad retreated to theirs. Only Gunta and Halman remained to escort Lord Marak and Lord Oktar. Lord Marak let the small group up to the Lords' Council Chamber. The room was empty except for Katzu, a Lords' Council mediator.

“Greetings Lord Marak, Lord Oktar,” welcomed Katzu.

“Greetings, Katzu,” Lord Marak replied. “I would like to call a meeting of the Lords’ Council. How do I do that?”

“Calling a meeting is fairly simple,” answered Katzu. “I can carry the word to the other members. They are all in residence today. It is most unusual though to call a meeting before the sixth member is elected. Perhaps you should wait until after the Assembly of Lords elects the new member of the Lords’ Council.”

“Time is not my ally,” replied Lord Marak. “Lord Oktar has the provocation needed to ensure help from the Lords’ Council. I fully expect the attacks to commence as soon as the Assembly of Lords is over and the lords make their way back home. I want our troops in place before then.”

“Then I shall contact the other members immediately,” nodded Katzu. “Lord Oktar should wait outside until the council calls for him.”

Lord Marak led Lord Oktar into the corridor outside the Lords’ Council Chamber as Katzu disappeared around a corner. The first member to arrive was Lord Patel and Lord Marak accompanied him into the chamber.

“So it has begun?” asked Lord Patel.

“It has,” nodded Lord Marak. “It is going to be much worse than I imagined. The Jiadin may be untrained as a group, but their skills are impressive. How did Bagora die?”

“An assassin while he was in bed,” frowned Lord Patel. “The knife was poisoned.”

“Has he been found?” asked Lord Marak.

“No,” Lord Patel shook his head. “He vanished without a trace. Marshal Chack is quite upset. Lord Marak, I tried to delay the vote for Emperor until you returned, but I was blindsided by Mirakotto. I left the chamber during the vote thinking that he would have to suspend the meeting. Instead he continued the vote. I am sorry.”

“It does not matter to me, Lord Patel,” replied Lord Marak. “I do not care who rules as long as we work together to defeat our common enemy. I do grieve for Bagora, though. He was a good man and a patriot. All of Khadora will miss him.”

The conversation halted as the other lords entered the chamber. Lord Quilo walked to the head of the table as the other lords took their seats. Katzu closed the door and stood near it.

“Lord Marak,” Lord Quilo began, “I understand that you have requested an urgent meeting of the Lords’ Council. For what purpose do you cause this body to gather?”

“Thank you for coming together so quickly,” Lord Marak began. “Lord Oktar waits outside this room. He would like to register a

grievance and request the assistance of the Lords' Council in preserving his clan."

"Is this the same matter that you brought before this council before?" asked Lord Quilo.

"It is," affirmed Lord Marak. "There has been an attack on the Balomar estate. An estimated five thousand Jiadin wearing the Glamaraldi uniform attacked the estate. They were repelled, but I fear that the defenses will not hold long."

"Rather than sending troops," frowned Lord Quilo, "shouldn't we be trying to mediate the dispute?"

"I am afraid that Lord Yungis will not accept any mediation," reported Lord Marak. "In my discussions with him, he showed nothing but contempt for the Lords' Council. I do not believe that he would follow the rulings of this council even if we could get him to accept mediation of the dispute."

"You have spoken to Lord Yungis personally?" questioned Lord Quilo. "Where was this? And when?"

"It was on the morning of the death of our Emperor," answered Lord Marak. "He arrived unannounced at the estate of Lord Oktar. I was there at the time."

"I have heard," interrupted Lord Kiamesh, "that there are a number of clans assembled at the Balomar estate. Is this true Lord Marak? And if so, is this not in itself a provocation?"

"There are a number of clans present on the estate," nodded Lord Marak. "Their presence there was unknown to Lord Yungis until he attacked. In fact, the large variety of uniforms confused the Jiadin when they attacked. I believe that is what stopped an all out assault. If their presence was not known, how then can it be a provocation?"

"A valid question," nodded Lord Kiamesh.

"And what are they doing there, Lord Marak?" asked Lord Garic. "Maybe Lord Yungis did not know they were there, but that does not alter the fact that they were present. What clans are present there? And why are they there?"

Lord Marak sighed as he listened to the question that he had wished he would not have to answer.

"There are a number of clans present on the Balomar estate," answered Lord Marak, "including the Torak clan. The reason that they are there is to repel foreign invaders from Khadora, an exercise that this body should be eager to aid. If the question of legality is an issue, I can assure this council that it is perfectly legal. My plan was presented to the Emperor before I instituted it. He approved of it and declared it to be legal. Still, that is not the issue before this council today. There has been a clear provocation, and Lord Oktar waits outside this chamber to seek help in preserving his clan. May I bring

him in?"

"Are you sure that Lord Yungis would resist mediation?" questioned Lord Kiamesh.

"Positive," nodded Lord Marak. "His contempt for our government is severe. I must make this council aware of the reasons for his contempt. He has five thousand Jiadin warriors at his disposal. That army would present a challenge to the mightiest of our Khadoran clans. Worse, he has allies who can quickly multiply his force by four. The Vessi and Lejune clans each have five thousand Jiadin warriors. You have heard of their recent conquests on the eastern frontier. There is also a fourth clan, the Pikata, who also have Jiadin warriors. My fear is that these four clans will join forces to sweep across Khadora. The Balomar estate is only the first of many conquests. If we do not make a stand now, Khadora as we know it will cease to exist. I implore this council to provide troops immediately."

"I move that this council immediately agree to take a stand on this provocation," said Lord Patel. "We have lost several clans already to these Jiadin armies. How many clans must we lose before we awaken to the real threat they present to Khadora?"

"There is merit to your request, Lord Marak," conceded Lord Kiamesh, "but you are proposing a solution that has never been used before. The Imperial troops are not numerous enough to halt the Jiadin. What do you want us to do?"

"I want armies," answered Lord Marak. "Each member of this council could send troops in the very least. Optimally, other clans outside this council could be convinced to send troops. We need fighters, Lord Kiamesh. Lots of them."

"And who will lead these troops?" asked Lord Kiamesh. "Are these great armies to be under your command?"

"Each clan could lead its own armies," answered Lord Marak. "To be effective, there must be coordination among the clans. I would be willing to accept that responsibility and report directly to this council."

"So you want our men for your own army?" asked Lord Garic. "That is preposterous."

"That is not what I said," frowned Lord Marak. "Look, I don't really care who coordinates them as long as we succeed in pushing the Jiadin back into Fakara. This is not about me, Lord Garic. This is about preserving Khadora."

"I am hesitant, Lord Marak," admitted Lord Quilo. "The eastern frontier is quite a distance from Khadoratung and the Imperial Valley. While some minor frontier clans may indeed disappear, I really don't think the Glamaraldi, or any other frontier clan, has the ability to battle its way here."

“Are not the frontier clans part of Khadora, Lord Quilo?” posed Lord Marak. “Does the Lords’ Council exist only to serve the interests of the Imperial Valley? If that is the case, why should the frontier clans abide by your rules? Suppose other clans decide to take the attitude of Lord Yungis and declare that the government in Khadoratung is not relevant. Will Khadora then shrink to only those clans in the Imperial Valley?”

“If the frontier clans want to ignore us,” retorted Lord Quilo, “they will do so at their own peril. The Imperial Valley clans are the heart of Khadora. We have the armies to crush any opponent.”

“Then use them,” grinned Lord Marak. “That is exactly what I am asking you to do. The Jiadin are stealing portions of Khadora as we speak, Lord Quilo. They are using a few fool lords to accomplish their goal, but do not for one minute think that Lord Yungis really controls these men. He may believe it now, but I do not. When Lord Yungis has served his purpose, the foreigners will toss him aside.”

“We may have to in the future,” conceded Lord Quilo, “but I think you see this as a chance to seek power for yourself, Lord Marak. Do not take me for a fool.”

“Perhaps there is a way to resolve this,” offered Lord Kiamesh. “We could choose one of our marshals to lead this force. I think we should first vote on the proposition of supporting Lord Oktar, and later deal with what the force will look like and who will lead it.”

Lord Garic frowned and rose from his seat. “I request a short recess,” he said.

“Five minutes,” nodded Lord Quilo.

Lord Garic walked swiftly out of the room and raced to the Emperor’s office. He was immediately admitted.

“What is it?” Emperor Mirakotto asked distractedly.

“The Lords’ Council is in session,” answered Lord Garic. “They are considering a proposal to send troops to aid the Balomar clan against the Glamaraldi.”

“That nonsense again,” snarled the Emperor. “Why do none of them understand that the frontier just doesn’t matter in the overall scheme of things? Has there been a provocation?”

“There has been,” nodded Lord Garic. “It looks like a resolution will pass the council this time. Lord Patel and Lord Kiamesh appear to be leaning towards it. Lord Quilo and myself are against it.”

“Just let them do it,” smirked the Emperor. “Their armies will suffer loses, and they will be the weaker for it. I cannot believe that they are such fools.”

“Very well,” frowned Lord Garic. “I thought you would be opposed to it.”

“Why?” questioned the Emperor.

“There is talk that Lord Marak would lead the armies,” shrugged Lord Garic.

“What?” shouted Emperor Mirakotto. “You did not mention anything about Lord Marak.”

“Well he is the one presenting the plan to the council,” frowned Lord Garic. “I thought that I had mentioned that.”

“So Lord Marak is seeking yet more power?” mused the Emperor. “He is a threat, Garic. I know that he had meetings with Bagora, but I cannot find any record of them. I am curious what schemes they had planned together.”

“Lord Marak did say that the Bagora had authorized the other clans that have armies out there already,” mentioned Lord Garic. “He said the Emperor had declared it legal.”

“What other clans?” inquired Emperor Mirakotto. “Do you know who they are?”

“He did not say,” Lord Garic shook his head. “He only mentioned that there were several and that the Torak clan was one of them.”

“And he is seeking more troops to fight under his banner?” questioned the Emperor.

“That is what he is proposing,” nodded Lord Garic. “Not only armies from the Lords’ Council, but also from other clans. He says that he is facing twenty thousand Jiadin warriors.”

“Such nonsense,” scowled the Emperor. “I will not allow Lord Marak’s power to grow any further. He may well become a thorn in my side.”

“My vote will not stop this resolution from passing,” declared Lord Garic. “I doubt that I can convince Lord Patel or Lord Kiamesh to vote against it.”

“Well I can stop it,” snarled the Emperor. “Return to the meeting, and tell them that all votes of the Lords’ Council on this matter must be authorized by the Emperor. Tell them that the Emperor has been notified that there are potential illegalities concerning the placement of troops at the Balomar estate. These illegalities will be fully investigated before the government can authorize any help to Lord Oktar.”

Lord Garic grinned and nodded as he left the office. He hurried back to the Lords’ Council Chamber. The other lords had already reassembled and Lord Garic took his seat.

“Very well,” Lord Quilo said. “Now that we are all refreshed, shall we put this issue to a vote?”

“You cannot,” replied Lord Garic. “I ran into the Emperor while I was out. He is most disturbed by reports of clans assembling at the Balomar estate. He has ordered an investigation into the legalities of the matter. He has ordered that the Lords’ Council votes on this matter

must be authorized by him personally until the investigation is complete. There will be no help for Lord Oktar until this is all settled."

"Did you empty his chamber pot while you were there, Lord Garic?" retorted Lord Patel.

"Is it legal for the Emperor to stop the Lords' Council from voting on this?" asked Lord Marak.

"The Emperor can step in if he feels that the Lords' Council is doing something in violation of the law," nodded Lord Quilo.

"But there has been a provocation," countered Lord Marak. "Emperor Bagora has already ruled on the legality of my troops being there, and additional troops after the provocation is clearly legal."

"This has nothing to do with legalities, Lord Marak," stated Lord Patel. "This has to do with his hatred of you. To allow this council to send troops under your command is to give you prestige. Mirakotto will never allow that. His investigation is merely one of the weapons that he will use to crush you. I advise you to withdraw the request."

"What if Lord Oktar makes the request?" asked Lord Marak. "I will step out of the entire affair and turn the troops over to someone else. This is not about me. This is about saving Khadora."

"I believe your offer to step out of this is sincere," Lord Kiamesh smiled thinly, "but once Mirakotto has entered into this fray, it will not matter if you withdraw. He will continue to block it no matter what. Believe me in this. I have been an outspoken foe of Mirakotto's since the day I joined this council. He is like a starving dog that has sunk his teeth into a piece of meat. He will not let go until it is devoured."

"It only makes sense to adjourn this meeting," nodded Lord Quilo. "You will have to manage with the troops you already have, Lord Marak. This meeting is adjourned."

The lords filed out of the room. When only Lord Quilo was left, Katzu quietly closed the door and walked across the room and sat down next to the Organila lord who was writing a journal entry about the meeting.

"What is it, Katzu?" Lord Quilo asked without looking up from his task.

"You ended the meeting quickly," commented Lord Quilo.

"What if I did?" shrugged Lord Quilo. "There was not going to be a resolution. Why listen to more arguments about it?"

"You were against Lord Marak's proposal then?" asked the mediator.

"You always were a keen observer of people, Katzu," smiled Lord Quilo. "Of all the mediators for the Lords' Council, your services are the most in demand. Your rulings have never been questioned. That is because you understand people and what makes them do what they

do. You make me proud."

"Most of the time," frowned Katzu, "you have made me proud as well. That is why I wanted to speak to you about this, Father."

"What is there to speak about?" questioned Lord Quilo. "While Lord Oktar may indeed have a problem, I see this whole request as a ruse by Lord Marak to gain power. He has already positioned troops illegally at the Balomar estate. Now he seeks thousands more to serve under his banner. Can you deny that he seeks power?"

"I know Lord Marak to be an honest and patriotic Khadoran," replied Katzu. "Let me ask you a question. The Organila clan has long had an alliance with the Morgar clan. I know there have been several times over the past few years when Lord Saycher has talked to you about the Situ's ambitions at Raven's Point. Is that not true?"

"That is correct," nodded Lord Quilo, "although I fail to see what that has to do with anything. The Situ were always desirous of expanding, and Lord Saycher relied on the Organila clan to protect him. Why shouldn't he? Our clans have had an alliance for generations."

"Didn't you on more than one occasion send troops to the Morgar estate to halt the Situ ambitions?" asked Katzu.

"Not to the Morgar estate," corrected Lord Quilo. "We did move troops close enough to warn the Situ that any attack would result in war with us. It always dissuaded the Situ from doing anything foolish."

"And you would have attacked the Situ if they had made a move against Lord Saycher, wouldn't you?" questioned the mediator.

"Without question," nodded Lord Quilo. "Force is the only way to stop a thief, son. That is the one thing that I never seemed to be able to teach you. Had you understood that, you would have made a fine replacement for me as head of the Organila clan."

"You know I abhor force if there is another way," smiled Katzu. "The life of a mediator serves me well. How has Lord Saycher been doing now that Raven's Point is a Torak estate instead of a Situ one?"

"Lord Saycher is very pleased," admitted Lord Quilo. "He has no fears that the Torak clan will infringe upon his lands. I guess it is all part of the strange peacefulness that has invaded the southern frontier."

"That peacefulness is no accident, Father," declared Katzu. "It was brought about by Lord Marak, who by the way is trying to protect Lord Oktar just as you would have protected Lord Saycher."

"He did not move his troops close to the Balomar estate," Lord Quilo pointed out. "He moved them onto the estate. There is a large difference there. What he did was illegal."

"Not true, Father," Katzu shook his head. "I was present when the

Emperor ruled on this matter. Lord Marak has every legal right to be on the Balomar estate."

"Every legal right?" echoed Lord Quilo. "That is not possible. Unless…" he frowned. "What I am thinking only proves the danger of Lord Marak. He is trying to increase his power at the expense of other clans."

"No, Father," Katzu shook his head. "You said that I have a special skill in seeing the true motives of people. I understand Lord Marak, as others do not. I am privy to much secret information about him and his dealings. I cannot betray that confidence, even to you, but I can assure you that he works for the good of all of Khadora. Emperor Bagora felt this about him as well. Why do you think he made that rare appeal in the Assembly of Lords? Bagora never nominated anyone for the Lords' Council, even when he was just a member of the council. Open your eyes, Father. I know you trusted Bagora's judgment, and I know you trust my judgment. There is no finer patriot of Khadora than Lord Marak. Support him."

Lord Quilo stared at his son for a long time without speaking. Finally, he picked up his papers and left the room.

Chapter 27

Old Acquaintance

It was the night before the opening session of the Assembly of Lords. The Imperial Palace was full of people, as lords from all over the country had come to Khadoratung to elect a new member to the Lords' Council. Lords gathered in corridors and discussed the rumors surrounding the assassination of Emperor Bagora.

On the lower level of the Imperial Palace, thousands of soldiers crammed into the dining room. The dining room was huge with dozens of rows of long tables and benches running along each side of them. Nearly a hundred Imperial soldiers worked in the kitchen preparing food for the soldiers who were there to escort their clan lords. The room was noisy, hot, and crowded as long lines of soldiers streamed in and out as they took turns eating.

The trouble started innocuously as some soldiers remarked upon the untidiness of the Vessi soldiers. The Jiadin warriors who wore the Vessi uniforms cared little for the traditions of Khadorans. Some wore their clan headbands; some did not. Only a third bothered to wear the wristbands, and half had discarded the belts that featured the symbol of their clan. The Vessi soldiers did not understand the taunts at first, but as the other Jiadin-supported clans entered, the remarks of other soldiers became inflammatory. The Vessi, Glamaraldi, Lejune, and Pikata soldiers banded together and started shouting insults at the Khadorans.

The spark that ignited the trouble occurred when a Pikata soldier tripped, his tray of food flying through the air to land in the middle of a group of Aritor soldiers. The stew splashed onto the crisp uniforms of the Aritor soldiers, and the Jiadin started laughing. The Aritor soldiers responded by hurling scraps of food at the Pikata troops. Within seconds, soldiers were charging one another. The four Jiadin clans squared off against the soldiers of all of the other clans. Fortunately, weapons had been forbidden within the Imperial Palace, but the fighting was still intense.

Tables were knocked over, and benches were torn from the floor and used to bash opponents. Some soldiers used their eating utensils to attack others. Several snared torches off the wall and attempted to ignite their adversaries. The hundred Imperial soldiers immediately discarded their cooking duties and streamed into the room in an attempt to restore order. They failed.

Someone alerted Marshal Chack, and he arrived with three hundred armed Imperial soldiers. They methodically cleared the room by starting at one end and working their way to the other. They subdued anyone who resisted the call to stop fighting, and evicted the others from the room. When the fighting was over, sixteen soldiers of various clans had died. Another four hundred required the services of healers.

Marshal Chack ordered all clan soldiers to return to their quarters and remain there until further notice. He ordered Imperial soldiers to enforce the ban on the movement of any clan soldiers and then reported to Emperor Mirakotto.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later," the marshal reported. "I have restricted all escorts to their quarters. My men are patrolling all of the residence corridors with orders to stop any clan soldier from leaving their quarters."

"They still have to eat," pondered the Emperor. "I do not want a repeat of such behavior. I am ordering all clan soldiers out of the palace. Let them camp in the outside area with the rest of the escorts."

"The lords are not going to like that," countered Marshal Chack. "They will feel unprotected without at least some of the soldiers nearby."

"I do not care what they think," snapped Emperor Mirakotto. "They have Imperial troops to protect them. Besides, no lord will be disadvantaged. Their enemies' troops will also be outside the palace. Carry out my orders, Marshal."

Marshal Chack bowed to the Emperor and left the room. He gathered every spare Imperial soldier that he could find and addressed them in the entrance foyer.

"You will start with the left residential corridor," he said to his troops. "We will empty the palace one suite at a time. Let them take their weapons, and escort them to an exit. Then you come back and do the same for the next clan. As you free up Imperial soldiers from the left residential corridor, I will send them to the right residential corridor. Move out."

The Imperial guards began to empty the palace of clan soldiers. Marshal Chack was kept busy as he was called to address the concerns of each lord as the complaints were made. It took over ten hours to empty the palace. Marshal Chack and the Imperial troops were exhausted.

* * *

Lord Marak rose early. He got dressed and left the empty Torak quarters. He hesitated a moment outside the door as he debated whether he wanted to eat in the lords dining room or the one set aside for the Lords' Council. It was early enough that neither kitchen might

be open. He decided on the Lords' Council kitchen, as they were more apt to be up early to serve the most important lords in Khadora. He climbed the stairs and found the dining room empty. He passed through the room and into the small kitchen. One man was busy making pastries. The man bowed his head slightly, but did not talk or stop his work. Lord Marak took two pastries from the tray and left the kitchen.

Lord Marak ate the pastries as he passed through the dining room and started down the stairs. His mind was distant as he walked. He kept replaying the previous day's meeting of the Lords' Council. He wondered if he could have played it any differently, and how he could recover from the loss. As he reached the main floor and stepped off the stairs, he did not notice the shadowy figure on the stairs leading down to the soldiers' dining room. He did see an Imperial soldier walking towards him as he turned down the left residence corridor to return to his quarters.

Lord Marak had not gone more than twenty paces along the residence corridor when he heard a noise behind him. He spun around and saw two figures. A dark clad man was hidden behind the Imperial guard. The Imperial soldier had both hands up to his throat, and his face was a bright red, veins bulging as if they were about to burst. On the floor in front of the Imperial soldier was a knife that had been dropped. Lord Marak frowned when he saw the telltale brown stain of poison upon its blade. He also noticed the Imperial soldier wore gloves on his hands.

The Imperial soldier was struggling to free something around his neck as the shadow behind him exerted more pressure. Lord Marak acted swiftly. He brought his right arm up in a swinging motion, and his fist connected with the Imperial guard's face. The soldier went limp, and Lord Marak recognized the shadow who had been behind the Imperial soldier.

"I want him alive, Fisher," Lord Marak said softly. "Let's get him into the Torak quarters."

Lord Marak bent and picked up the knife. Fisher draped the soldier over his shoulder and followed Lord Marak to the Torak quarters. Lord Marak unlocked the door and held it open while Fisher entered and deposited the unconscious man in one of the soldier's bunks. Lord Marak closed the door and joined Fisher in the barracks room.

"What are you doing in the palace?" asked Lord Marak. "They will arrest you if they find you. All clan personal have been ordered out of the Imperial Palace."

"I know," frowned Fisher as he removed the wire from the soldier's throat. He bound the man's hands and legs before saying,

“Isn’t it convenient that all of the escorts are out of the palace while this assassin runs free?”

“Do you think this is the man who killed Bagora?” asked Lord Marak.

“Without a doubt,” nodded Fisher.

Suddenly there was a loud pounding on the door. Lord Marak reached into his pouch and found a Torak staff pin as the pounding continued.

“Put this on,” ordered Lord Marak. “We can say that you were sent to tell me something.”

Lord Marak ran to the door and opened it slightly. Marshal Chack pushed the door open and barged in.

“What is going on here, Lord Marak?” demanded the marshal. “I saw you and your man carrying an Imperial guard into this room from the other end of the corridor. I demand an explanation.”

Lord Marak sighed and pointed to the barracks room. “Come in,” Lord Marak said as he closed the door and led the marshal into the barracks room. “I was just going to try and find you. We have captured the assassin.”

Marshal Chack’s eyes narrow skeptically as he gazed at Fisher and then the Imperial soldier. “Who are you?” he demanded of Fisher.

“I am a friend, Marshal,” Fisher replied. “This soldier is your assassin. Show him the knife, Lord Marak.”

Marshal Chack looked briefly at the knife, but his attention immediately returned to Fisher. “I asked who you were,” reminded the marshal. “Don’t expect me to believe the staff pin that you are wearing. I personally escorted everyone out of the residence sections myself last night, and nobody has been allowed into the palace since then without my express approval. Who are you?”

“I am a spy,” answered Fisher. “Why is your interest on me instead of this assassin?”

“Because I know that soldier,” stated Marshal Chack. “Andretti has been a member of the Imperial Palace for a number of years. Did you know this man was a spy, Lord Marak?”

“I have known him for some time,” admitted Lord Marak. “He is a spy, but he is not your enemy, Marshal Chack. He just saved my life. That knife was aimed at my back.”

The soldier started to wake up. He groaned and opened his eyes to see Marshal Chack in the room.

“What is this?” he said indignantly. “Why am I tied up?”

“What proof do you have of your accusation, Lord Marak?” asked the marshal.

“Our words should be enough,” declared Lord Marak. “If you need more, you can find out the whereabouts of Andretti when

Emperor Bagora was assassinated. Check to see where he was when Lord Woton was killed, or when I was attacked in the marketplace."

"Or search his quarters," suggested Fisher. "He must keep that poison somewhere."

"What is going on?" demanded the soldier. "What tale are they stringing, Marshal Chack? I was just walking the corridor when I was attacked from behind."

The marshal turned and walked to the door to the corridor. He opened the door and blew a whistle. Three Imperial soldiers came running. He gave instructions to each and then returned to the barracks room.

"We will have answers to those questions shortly," declared the marshal. "What reason would this man have to kill anyone?"

"What reasons do any assassins need?" posed Fisher. "Perhaps we should ask him. I know several methods of persuasive questioning. I am sure that he will tell us everything."

"I will have none of that on my watch," the marshal shook his head. "I will have men transport him to a cell until the Emperor rules on this."

"No," Fisher stated. "He will not be moved from this room until we have the answers we need."

"Who are you to make demands?" snapped the marshal. "The Imperial Palace is my domain. You will not give orders here. In fact, you will be arrested. I still do not know who you are."

"My name is Fisher," the spy stated.

Suddenly, Andretti gasped. Everyone turned to look at him and the man was trembling. "Take me to the Emperor," he demanded. "I will tell everything only to the Emperor."

"Marshal," Fisher said, "these quarters are the Torak quarters. As such, Lord Marak controls what goes on in here. You may stop us from leaving these quarters with this assassin, but he is staying here until we have a confession out of him."

"That is impossible," argued Marshal Chack. "The entire Imperial Palace in under my domain. The Emperor will back me up on that."

"Do you know what clan this man belongs to, Marshal?" asked Fisher.

"No," responded the marshal. "When someone joins the Imperial Palace, their association with their clan is over. As it is with the Emperor, so it is with the lowest of Imperial workers. His clan does not matter."

"I advise you to rethink your position," declared Fisher. "This man is Andretti Argetta. Small wonder that he demands to be taken to the Emperor. Mirakotto Argetta is this man's only hope of living."

"They have no right to keep me tied up," shouted Andretti. "I

demand that you take me to the Emperor."

There was a knock on the door and the marshal moved quickly to answer it. He returned with a heavy crease across his brow.

"He was one of the two guards on duty at the Emperor's suite the night Bagora was killed," Marshal Chack stated. "He left his post right after the Emperor said he was going to bed. We also found this hidden in his quarters."

The marshal held up a jar of brown liquid. He put the jar on a table and glared at Andretti.

"You will tell me all that you know," Marshal Chack declared. "You will tell me now, or I will leave you here with Fisher."

"You can't do that," trembled Andretti. "The Emperor will have your head."

"And why is that?" asked the marshal.

"Because he works for Mirakotto," answered Lord Marak. "It all makes sense now. The first attack was to kill Bagora and have me blamed for it. The only problem is this incompetent fool killed Lord Woton instead. That must have really riled Mirakotto. Woton was one his boys."

"Are you suggesting that Emperor Mirakotto knows what this fool has been doing?" questioned the marshal.

"Isn't it obvious?" retorted Fisher.

"How is it that you know each other?" asked the marshal.

"Andretti is an old acquaintance. He is the man who killed my family," Fisher said with hatred in his voice. "I vowed to kill him and the lord that ordered the deaths."

"Are you threatening the Emperor?" asked Marshal Chack.

"Are you protecting the man who ordered the death of Emperor Bagora, Marshal?" countered Fisher.

"Marshal," pleaded Andretti, "I will tell you everything, but you must promise to get me out of here."

"Tell me," demanded the marshal.

"Get me out first," countered Andretti.

"I am a man of my word," scowled Marshal Chack. "Confess now if you ever want to leave this room."

"Alright," nodded Andretti as he began sweating. "I did kill Bagora. Mirakotto ordered it. All I did was follow orders. Nothing more."

"And Woton?" questioned the marshal.

"Marak is right," answered Andretti. "Bagora was meant to die and the blame put on Marak. I stole the star from his room while they ate. Mirakotto was furious with me for killing Lord Woton."

"And what about the attempts on Lord Marak," inquired the marshal.

“This was the third,” confessed Andretti. “The first was in the marketplace. I was sure that I had knifed him that day. I do not understand how he survived. I also tried again right after he bought that house. He started walking to the palace with only two guards, but by the time he came near my hiding place, nearly a whole squad had come out of nowhere and surrounded him.”

“How did you get into Bagora’s room?” asked the marshal.

“I had put a rope from his balcony during the day,” answered Andretti. “I also used a wire so I could unlock the doors to the balcony. I just waited downstairs until he was asleep and then climbed up. It was easy.”

Marshal Chack breathed deeply as rage raced through him. He wanted to step forward and strangle Andretti, but he had given his word. Now he wondered what he was to do with the assassin. Mirakotto would not allow him to be killed. Worse, if Mirakotto learned that Andretti had confessed, Chack’s life would be in danger. It would be much easier to get a new marshal than to trust the one he already had. The marshal walked into the main room of the Torak quarters as he pondered what to do.

Suddenly, he heard a scream from the barracks room. He raced in to see the poisoned knife protruding from Andretti’s neck. Fisher rose and wiped the blood off his hands. The marshal stared questioningly at Fisher.

“You had given your word to take him out of here,” shrugged Fisher. “This fool has already destroyed my life and Bagora’s. He has tried to kill Lord Marak. I could not let him destroy yours, too. Mirakotto would surely have you killed if you arrested Andretti. He cannot afford for anyone to know he had Bagora killed.”

“And what am I supposed to do now?” sighed Chack as he sat on a bunk. “You have just murdered a man in my presence. You admit to being a spy, you have vowed to kill the Emperor, and I now know that I work for a murdering emperor. What am I to do? My life is over no matter what I do.”

“Your life is not over,” declared Lord Marak as he placed a comforting hand on the marshal’s shoulder. “You have done nothing wrong. In fact, all of your actions have been exemplary. Your men have already found the poison in Andretti’s quarters. There is no way to hide the identity of the assassin at this point, but there is no reason for Mirakotto to know that he confessed anything to you. Simply tell him the truth, but only the bare minimum.”

“The bare minimum?” echoed Marshal Chack.

“Yes,” nodded Lord Marak. “Tell him that Andretti tried to assassinate me and failed. State that you had Andretti’s dead body carried out of the Torak quarters. Mirakotto may wonder if Andretti

talked before he died, but he will suspect that only I might have the knowledge that we share. My quarters are, after all, supposed to be empty of everyone but myself."

"I see two problems with your plan, Lord Marak," sighed the marshal. "Mirakotto will seek your death to make sure that nobody learns what you might know, and I still have in my presence a spy who has threatened to kill the Emperor. I cannot just ignore that."

"Mirakotto already wants me dead," Lord Marak pointed out. "Andretti told us as much. As for Fisher, I suggest he leave this palace immediately. You should forbid him reentry. If he cannot get back into the palace, you do not have to fear the threat of Mirakotto's assassination."

"I really have nothing to arrest Fisher for other than his threat," conceded Chack. "His execution of Andretti merely saved my men the effort. Once Andretti had confessed, his life was already forfeit. The problem with Fisher is that I am torn. Part of me wants him to flee, but part of me wishes him success in killing the Emperor. How can I remain as marshal when I feel like this? My life is supposed to be dedicated to protecting the Emperor."

"Marshal," Fisher said as he stood, "you are good at what you do. Continue to do it. You serve Khadora, not any one man. I have vowed to kill Mirakotto for what he did to my family, but that vow was made years ago. I have no need to take your skills away from Khadora to satisfy my own selfish desires. I will leave the palace immediately and not look back. I will never return here unless I am asked to. Does that make your decision any easier?"

"It does, Fisher," nodded the marshal. "I think I can understand what you have gone through. I appreciate you giving up your lifelong quest to spare me, but I still have to live serving under a man who is a murderer. I don't know if I can do that."

"Your job does not require you to agree with the Emperor," Lord Marak said. "All Khadora can ask of any man is to do his best. You have been doing that and will continue to do so. I see no conflict. Let me walk Fisher out of the palace while you get some men to remove the body."

Marshal Chack nodded distractedly as Lord Marak walked Fisher out of the room. He marched him out of the Imperial Palace. They walked to the park and sat on a bench.

"What will you do now?" Lord Marak asked Fisher.

"What do you mean?" retorted Fisher. "I will do what I always do."

"I mean about your vow," said Lord Marak.

"So did I," grinned Fisher. "I promised that I would not return to the palace until I was asked to. So I need to get an invitation. I do not

think that will be too difficult."

"You cannot kill the Emperor," sighed Lord Marak. "Fisher, you have too much good to offer Khadora to throw it all away on the likes of Mirakotto."

"You speak words of wisdom as you always do," conceded Fisher. "Are you sure you don't want to be a shaman?"

"I have enough titles at the moment," chuckled Lord Marak. "Will you come with me to the Balomar estate?"

"Not right away," Fisher shook his head. "There is still the matter of General Didyk to pursue. I think he was staying on an estate in the Imperial Valley. I would like to find out which one. It would make StarWind happy."

"Well try to stay out of trouble," smiled Lord Marak. "I still have much for you to do before this is all done. How did you just happen to be there when he attacked me?"

"I was following him all night," explained Fisher. "I recognized him when I saw him. I was amazed that he had become an Imperial soldier because he was not the type to care about anything. It made me wonder why he would dedicate his life to serving the Emperor. When you went up to the kitchen, he started walking back and forth while he waited for you to return. He wanted it to look like he was just happening to be walking by. I knew his plans as soon as he made his move. By the time he had slipped his gloves on, I was right behind him."

"Well I am certainly glad that you were," smiled Lord Marak. "You saved my life."

"Perhaps," shrugged Fisher. "Your Qubari armor saved you the last time. I suspect it might have again."

"I would prefer not to test your theory," sighed Lord Marak.

"Mirakotto will try twice as hard to kill you now," warned Fisher. "You know that, don't you?"

"I suppose that he will," nodded Lord Marak. "At least he won't have Andretti around to do it."

"People like Andretti are easy to come by," frowned Fisher. "Don't let your guard down because Andretti is dead. Mirakotto will want you dead, and he seems to get what he wants."

Chapter 28

Heart of Khadora

Lord Marak reentered the Imperial Palace after Fisher had walked away. He did not bother to return to the Torak quarters, but instead walked straight to the Assembly Chamber. He sat at his desk in the rear of the room and wove an air tunnel to take his mind off of the events of the morning. He was amazed to hear lords talking about the capture and death of Andretti. There was no mention of the assassin being a member of the Argetta clan, but everyone seemed to be aware that the assassin of Emperor Bagora had been caught. Several also spoke of the recent attack on Lord Marak.

"I heard that you captured the assassin this morning," greeted Lord Shamino as he sat at the next desk. "Your luck seems to be blessed by the gods."

"There is only one god," Lord Marak replied without taking his attention away from the air tunnel, "and I do not believe in luck. How has word of this spread so quickly?"

"I imagine that anything this big is news to everyone," shrugged the Sorgan lord. "There is a rumor that the assassin was an Imperial soldier. Is that true?"

"He wore the uniform of one," confirmed Lord Marak, "but it takes more than a uniform to make someone a true Imperial soldier. Those men have dedicated their lives to Khadora and put their clans behind them. I hope the truth about Andretti will not sully their reputation."

The horns sounded and the lords hurried to their seats. Emperor Mirakotto was ushered onto the stage by a score of Imperial soldiers.

"Lords of Khadora," Emperor Mirakotto began, "thank you for assembling this day to elect a new member to the Lords' Council. As you already know, this vacancy was necessitated by my rise to Emperor upon Bagora's death. May it be the last time that you are called together for a while. I know the journey is upsetting for the business of your estates. I will turn this meeting over to Lord Patel who will be leading this session of the Assembly of Lords."

"No mention of the assassin," whispered Lord Shamino.

"I noticed that," Lord Marak remarked as he saw the Emperor glaring at him from the throne on the stage. "I wonder if he is afraid of what I might have found out from Andretti."

"What?" asked Lord Shamino.

Lord Marak ignored the question as Lord Patel stepped to the center of the stage.

"The only purpose of this meeting of the Assembly of Lords," Lord Patel began, "is to elect a new member to the Lords' Council. At this time, I will accept nominations from the assembly."

Lord Kiamesh rose and was recognized.

"Lords of Khadora," Lord Kiamesh said loudly, "the loss of Emperor Bagora will be felt in every corner of Khadora. He was a wonderful leader, a magnanimous lord, and a loving father. I can think of no better tribute to such a great patriot of Khadora than to nominate his son, Lord Chenowith of the Walkan clan, to the position of a member of the Lords' Council. It is my hope that Lord Chenowith will one day follow in his father's footsteps and become Emperor of Khadora."

The room erupted in a flow of cheers. The shouts of backing for Lord Chenowith were so great that Emperor Mirakotto broke his eye contact with Lord Marak to gaze about the room. Lord Marak could almost feel the disgust that the Emperor felt towards the other lords' adulation of Lord Chenowith. He knew that Mirakotto was envious of the attention that was paid to others.

Lord Patel waited until the room quieted before he asked for other nominations. There were none. He moved quickly to call for a vote without objections. Being in the rear of the room, Lord Marak was among the last to vote. Many lords had already cast their vote and left the room after doing so. Lord Marak rose after voting and walked into the grand foyer outside the Assembly Chamber. Groups of lords were scattered all over the wide-open area.

As Lord Marak walked out of the room, several of his lords immediately converged on him. Lord Rybak of the Situ, Lord Sevrin of the Ragatha, Lord Burdine of the Litari, and Lord Shamino of the Sorgan all gathered around him.

"Is it true, Lord Marak?" asked Lord Rybak. "Did you capture the assassin?"

"I had help," admitted Lord Marak, "but there is no doubt that he is the man who killed Bagora."

"They said you shoved a knife into his throat," commented Lord Sevrin.

"Whoever is spreading these tales was not there to see it," responded Lord Marak. "Do not encourage such tales. Who captured him and how it was done is not important. What is important is that Andretti will no longer pose a danger to the good people of Khadora."

"I also heard that the Lords' Council turned down your request for troops," interjected Lord Burdine. "What does this mean for our troops on the eastern frontier?"

“It certainly will make their job much harder,” frowned Lord Marak, “if not impossible. If all of the Jiadin converge together, our forces are doomed.”

“Perhaps we should recall them?” suggested Lord Shamino.

“To what end?” asked Lord Marak. “If we abandon the Balomar estate, who will ever stand with us in the future? It might be better to gather all of our forces together and send them to the eastern frontier.”

“Do you mean to strip away the defenses of our own estates?” asked Lord Sevrin. “That would be suicide. There are far too many clans that would eagerly take advantage of us. You must not do that, Lord Marak.”

Lord Marak felt the hair rising on the back of his neck. He turned swiftly, but casually and gazed at a group of four lords not twenty paces away. The four lords were staring at him. Lord Marak left his group and strode towards the four lords.

“So you decided to come after all, Lord Yungis,” opened Lord Marak.

“Why not?” smirked the Glamaraldi lord. “For all your talk about the Lords’ Council coming down against me, I understand that they refused your request for more troops.”

“That leaves you rather alone, Lord Marak,” said Lord Damirath of the Pikata clan.

Lord Marak turned to face Lord Damirath and felt a chill race down his spine. The man’s eyes were black and limitless.

“Whatever you are after in Khadora, Lord Damirath,” declared Lord Marak, “you will not achieve it. I advise you to return to wherever it is you came from.”

Lord Marak was not sure where his words had come from, but they felt natural, unlike Lord Damirath. The Torak lord wished he had the Sword of Torak with him. He felt certain that its hilt would warm his hand as he stood before Lord Damirath.

“What are you talking about?” blustered Lord Samert of the Vessi clan. “Lord Damirath is the lord of the Pikata. They are an old and established Khadoran clan, unlike the Torak. How dare you suggest he leave this country of ours?”

“Perhaps it is you, Lord Marak, who does not belong in Khadora,” added Lord Falawert of the Lejune clan.

Lord Marak locked eyes with Lord Damirath as he spoke, “The Jiadin failed to take control in Fakara. They will also fail in Khadora. It does not matter what uniforms you put on the Jiadin, they will always be known for what they are. If Zygor and Brakas have led you to believe otherwise, then the truth is going to wound you fatally.”

Lord Marak saw the spark of recognition in Lord Damirath’s eyes

at the mention of Brakas and Zygor. He was not sure how those two fit in, but he was sure that eliminating them would end the Jiadin invasion.

"Your words mean little, Lord Marak," snarled Lord Yungis. "I was generous with Lord Oktar when I allowed him two days to leave. I now extend the same courtesy to you and the foolish clans that follow your lead. Remove your men from the Balamor estate or die. There will not be another warning."

"You should listen and obey, Torak," smirked Lord Damirath. "You cannot win. Surely, you recognize that now. The Time of Cleansing is soon upon us. Run, Torak, run."

Being called Torak set Marak's nerves on edge. Mention of the Time of Cleansing convinced Lord Marak that he was not dealing with a Khadoran lord. Again he gazed into the depthless eyes of Lord Damirath. What was it that Mistake had said? Zygor and Brakas arrived, but Zygor had not been seen leaving. That was it. Was it possible for a mage to take another's body? He promised himself that he would contact the Chula as soon as could to get an answer to that question. Or should he just bluff and see what happened?

"I am surprised that you would welcome the Time of Cleansing, Zygor," smiled Lord Marak. "That is the time of your master's true death."

The three Khadoran lords looked on in confusion as Lord Damirath stepped back and snarled at Lord Marak.

"That will never happen, Torak," spat Lord Damirath. "Not in a thousand years. I think you should ignore the warning of Lord Yungis. I personally look forward to seeing you die at Balomar."

Lord Damirath spun and strode away from the confrontation. The other three hosts to the Jiadin quickly followed after a few strange looks at Lord Marak.

Lord Marak was shaken by the encounter with Zygor. If his opponents actually had the capability of taking over the body of another person, what other great powers could they possibly have? Lord Marak suddenly realized how woefully unprepared Khadora was for the invasion that was to come. Just uniting the clans of Khadora would not be enough to prepare for the evil onslaught. Lord Marak shook his head and headed for the Lords' Council dining room for the midday meal.

When he arrived, Lord Marak's mind was still dwelling upon the encounter with Zygor. He barely noticed the other lords assembled for the meal.

"So Lord Marak has single-handedly captured the assassin of the Imperial Palace," taunted Lord Garic. "Was he about to betray you, Lord Marak?"

Lord Marak spun and glared at Lord Garic. “I think your master is calling you, Garic. You had better leave immediately.”

Lord Garic was taken aback by Lord Marak’s abrupt challenge. He looked around at the other lords and saw no humor in their faces. He rose unsteadily and left the room. When he was gone, Lord Marak shook his head and sighed.

“I apologize to all of you for that outburst,” he said. “The events of the day are bearing down on me. Please forgive me.”

“For scaring Garic out of the room?” chuckled Lord Kiamesh. “No apologies are necessary, Lord Marak. Sit and ease your troubles.”

Lord Marak nodded gratefully at Lord Kiamesh and then noticed that Lord Chenowith was present.

“Lord Chenowith,” smiled Lord Marak, “congratulations on your election. I also want to offer my condolences in regards to your father. Emperor Bagora was a true patriot. He will be sorely missed.”

“Thank you, Lord Marak,” Lord Chenowith replied without emotion. “I do have a question about Andretti if you would not mind answering it.”

“There is not much that I can say about it,” shrugged Lord Marak.

“We shall see,” continued Lord Chenowith. “I cannot figure out why an Imperial soldier would want to kill an Emperor. Did Andretti give you any idea of why he killed my father?”

Lord Marak stared at the table in front of him for several moments. He sighed heavily and looked up at Lord Chenowith.

“He was an assassin,” declared Lord Marak. “He did what assassins do.”

“You mean he was just following orders?” questioned Lord Chenowith.

“Yes,” Lord Marak nodded.

“And do you know who was giving him orders?” Lord Chenowith persisted.

“I do,” nodded Lord Marak, “but I prefer not to broach the subject. There is already too much disharmony among us. Your loss is great Lord Chenowith, but losing you as well would be a grievous loss for Khadora. I ask you not to pursue the matter.”

“Not to pursue the matter?” Lord Chenowith echoed as his voice rose. “Andretti killed my father, Lord Marak. If you know who ordered that assassination, I demand to know.”

“And what will you do with the information, Lord Chenowith?” questioned Lord Marak. “Will you press the authorities to arrest the man based upon my word alone? What if that man is more respected than me? What will you do then? I do not mean to be harsh, Lord Chenowith. If I saw a way that you could avenge your father’s death, I would gladly tell you what I know, but I will not burden you with

information that will destroy you."

"Mirakotto," Lord Kiamesh swore under his breath. "I thought it had to be him, but you have just confirmed it, Lord Marak. There is no other man who could stand up to the Lords' Council if we were united, and united we would be in this matter. Mercy, what are we to do?"

"We can do nothing," Lord Quilo replied. "Lord Marak is right in not revealing what he knows. Any action we took would be as serious a crime against Khadora as that perpetrated by Andretti. Surely you can see that, Lord Chenowith?"

"Two wrongs do not make a right," nodded Lord Chenowith. "Still, a fire burns in my belly as I think of the treachery that has been committed here. Tell me, Lord Marak, what would you do if you were in my position?"

Lord Marak sat for a while before answering. He tried to put himself in Lord Chenowith's place.

"My first reaction would be as yours is," answered Lord Marak. "I would demand swift revenge, regardless of the consequences to myself, but I never act on emotions alone. There are things going on today that are far more important than revenge for a treacherous act. Khadora is heading into a storm of a magnitude like we have never seen. Whatever I can do to help Khadora prepare to meet this evil is far more important than my life. It is more important than the lives of all of my loved ones. My revenge would tear this country apart at the very time that I need to help bring it together. I could not allow myself to harm Khadora that way for my own selfish goals."

"You think these Jiadin invasions are that much of a threat to Khadora?" inquired Lord Chenowith.

"No," Lord Marak shook his head. "The invasions are only the beginning. They are meant to bring chaos to Khadora so that our armies will not be able to respond to the real threat."

"And what is this real threat?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"I do not know for sure," frowned Lord Marak. "I know it is an evil that we are incapable of imagining. I know this sounds crazy, but given enough time I could show you what I mean. There are ancient prophecies that have predicted the battles that we will have to endure. The prophecies explain the signs of the times, and those signs are now showing up."

"What kind of signs?" asked Lord Kiamesh.

"Grulak was one of the signs," answered Lord Marak. "Since the founding of Khadora and Omunga, the people have been forbidden to marry the indigenous peoples of the land. These prohibitions were put in place to protect us from a failed magic. The prophecies spoke of a Time of Calling. It means that someone would intermarry with the indigenous peoples and ancient memories would be restored. Those

memories would call the evil to this land. Grulak was a half-breed. His mother was Qubari."

"Magic is nonsense," scowled Lord Quilo. "You cannot shape the future of a country on ancient prophecies and magic."

"Can't you?" retorted Lord Marak. "The magic that you call nonsense blasted a hole in the prison where I was kept. I have spoken to Fakarans who described the mage that ruled over Grulak. The man was not human as you and I define the term. He was a magical being. When he died, his body ceased to exist. There was nothing left but his clothes. How would your armies battle that, Lord Quilo?"

"If it is true," shrugged Lord Quilo. "Are you so quick to accept the word of a Fakaran?"

"I have seen similar beings myself," answered Lord Marak. "I know there is doubt in your minds, but I am not trying to push my views upon you on this matter. I ask only that you keep an open mind. I will find a way to prove my words to you in the future."

"But you are trying to press your ideas in dealing with the Jiadin," responded Lord Chenowith. "I understand you came before the Lords' Council yesterday in an appeal for troops to aid the Balomar."

"Quite true," nodded Lord Marak. "Troops are desperately needed out there. I had a brief talk just moments ago with the four lords of the eastern frontier who have Jiadin warriors. I am sure that they will combine their forces now. That is twenty thousand Jiadin that will be attacking Lord Oktar. Emperor Mirakotto has forbidden the council to come to my aid even though there is provocation."

"You have troops out there now?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"I do," conceded Lord Marak.

"What other clans have troops out there?" pushed Lord Chenowith. "And do not try to avoid the question, Lord Marak."

Lord Marak frowned as he stared at Lord Chenowith. He had never met Bagora's son before, but he was getting the feeling that Chenowith didn't care for him much. Still, there was little point in hiding the clans that were out there. With the coming casualties, everyone would know soon anyways.

"There are six clans represented out there besides the Balomar," answered Lord Marak. "The Torak, Sorgan, Litari, Situ, Ragatha, and Nordon clans have soldiers ready to fight."

"The Nordon?" questioned Lord Quilo as he looked expectantly at Lord Patel.

"Why are you men out there, Lord Patel?" asked Lord Chenowith.

"They are needed," answered Lord Patel. "I have contributed two cortes from each of my estates, as did each of the other clans."

"Why did you commit troops out there in the first place?" asked

Lord Chenowith

“Because Lord Marak asked me to,” Lord Patel sighed in frustration. “Just where are you going with all of these questions. I do not probe into your clan dealings.”

“Just one more question,” Lord Chenowith said as he stared into Lord Patel’s eyes. “If Lord Marak never existed, would your troops be out there today?”

“Yes,” Lord Patel shook his head. “I mean no. Let me explain. If Lord Marak had not requested my troops, I would never have been wise enough to know that they were needed, but knowing the situation as I do now, then yes, I would have sent my troops. The Jiadin must be stopped at all costs. I know that is hard to see as we sit in the safety of the Imperial Valley, but this safety is an illusion. The Jiadin will grow and grow as they eat up more clans. It is much better to stop them now while they are only twenty thousand strong.”

“Only twenty thousand?” echoed Lord Quilo. “That is over three hundred cortes. There is no army in Khadora that is anywhere near that size.”

“I really must insist an end to this questioning, Lord Chenowith,” stated Lord Marak. “Satisfying your curiosity is not worth the risk that my people might have to endure.”

“Oh this is about more than just my curiosity, Lord Marak,” countered Lord Chenowith. “There is a matter of legalities here. I understand that you assured the Lords’ Council that you had a legal right to be on the Balomar estate. What is Lord Patel’s legal right to be there? Or Lord Sevrin’s? Or any of the others?”

“What does it matter now?” retorted Lord Marak. “The Emperor has refused my request to the Lords’ Council. The men at the Balomar estate will die in the coming week. Does it really matter to you if they were there legally?”

“It does,” insisted Lord Chenowith. “It matters a great deal. Tell us how you can legally claim to be at the Balomar estate and have all of these other clans there with you.”

“I will not,” Lord Marak shook his head. “Ask me after next week and perhaps I will tell you.”

“So you plan to return to the Balomar estate yourself?” asked Lord Chenowith.

“I do,” nodded Lord Marak. “I would never ask my people to do something that I fear to do myself. I will be there with them.”

“All the more reason to tell us now then,” insisted Lord Chenowith. “Seeing as you won’t be around later to tell us.”

“I will say nothing more, Lord Chenowith,” declared Lord Marak. “I have indulged your curiosity to a fault. I do not wish to be rude, but it is not in my interests to speak more of this.”

“I have done something that I am very ashamed of, Lord Marak,” the Walkan lord said. “My father, Emperor Bagora, was a student of history. As such, he saved every scrap of paper that passed through his hands. He also kept a daily journal of both his meetings and his private thoughts. He would periodically send those papers home in a locked box. In the despair that followed my father’s death, I dared to open the last box he sent home. I know he would chastise me for it if he were alive today, but he is not.”

“Please don’t take this further, Lord Chenowith,” pleaded Lord Marak. “My meetings with your father were quite private.”

Lord Quilo and Lord Kiamesh sat on the edges of their chairs, their eyes glued to Lord Chenowith with anticipation.

“I must, Lord Marak,” Lord Chenowith continued. “I spent the entire night reading his journal. You are mentioned many times in it. In fact, as the night wore on, I became quite bitter that my father thought more of you than he did of me.”

“That is not fair,” protested Lord Marak. “I am sure that your father loved you dearly. Do not think poorly of him based upon some sporadic writings.”

“I do not think poorly of him, Lord Marak,” countered Lord Chenowith. “My father was the greatest man I have ever known. The point is, I know the reason that your presence out there is considered legal. I think the rest of the lords here have a right to know as well. They have the right to know whom they are dealing with. The question is, are you going to tell them, or am I?”

“I can only ask you not to,” sighed Lord Marak as he shook his head. “If you read your father’s words, then you understand why I have done what I have done. It is not for my own glory that I have acted, but rather the security of our country.”

“Tell us already,” interrupted Lord Quilo. “What secret dealings are going on?”

“Very well,” shrugged Lord Chenowith. “Lord Oktar swore Vows of Service to Lord Marak so that the Torak lord would be able to station troops on his estate.”

“Vows of Service to another lord?” questioned Lord Kiamesh. “How can that work?”

“It works quite well actually,” declared Lord Chenowith. “Lord Marak learned this trick early in his career as a lord. You see, all of the other clans out there also gave Vows of Service to Lord Marak.”

“Even the Nordon?” gasped Lord Kiamesh. “Is this true, Lord Patel?”

“It is true,” nodded Lord Patel.

“Why?” asked Lord Kiamesh.

“Each of the clans attacked Lord Marak,” explained Lord

Chenowith, “and each of them lost. Now Lord Marak thinks this is something to be hidden. He thinks that some lords will find fault with his method of solving disputes. Instead of conquering his foes and crushing their armies, Lord Marak negotiates them into surrender and then assumes a patriarchal role over them. That is the reason for the serenity and prosperity of the southern frontier.”

“That is remarkable,” Lord Quilo said in surprise. “That is why the Situ no longer threaten the Morgar, and the Litari no longer speak ill of the Ragatha. Amazing, simply amazing.”

“What an ingenious way to solve difficulties,” nodded Lord Kiamesh. “Tell me, Lord Patel, how does it work?”

“Quite well actually,” Lord Patel said. “I was quite opposed to the idea at first, as you can imagine, but until now, I have found it enlightening.”

“Why until now?” asked Lord Chenowith.

“Your exposing our arrangements will have consequences, Lord Chenowith,” sighed Lord Marak. “There are some powerful lords who will use this information to my detriment.”

“Perhaps,” nodded Lord Chenowith, “but none of them are in this room.”

“Are you saying that you are willing to keep these arrangements secret?” asked Lord Patel.

“I am,” nodded Lord Chenowith. “I am sorry to put you through this, Lord Marak, but you are asking these lords to put armies under your control. Is it not reasonable that they should know the truth about you?”

“The arrangements have been secret to protect those who have sworn to me more than anything else,” replied Lord Marak. “The hardest part of swearing to another lord is the embarrassment of having lost control of your clan, although those who have sworn to me know that this is not the case. I exercise very little control over the clans. Pride is one of the greatest problems this country faces. It makes it almost impossible for us to unite.”

“Besides,” Lord Patel interjected, “you are not being asked to send troops. The Emperor will not allow it.”

“The night my father died,” Lord Chenowith said, “we talked extensively about this problem on the frontier. We discussed many things, but I finally asked him what he would do to solve the problem. His answer confused me greatly. I had no understanding of his words until I later read his journal.”

“What did he say he would do?” asked Lord Quilo.

“He said he would swear Vows of Service to Lord Marak and march his armies onto the Balomar estate,” declared Lord Chenowith. “That is what I am prepared to do, Lord Marak. I will have thirty

cortes ready to depart in the morning."

"You can't be serious?" gasped Lord Kiamesh.

"There is no reason for the vows at this point, Lord Chenowith," smiled Lord Marak. "A provocation has occurred. Your vows are no longer needed to move your troops. The law is with us even if the Emperor is not."

"You may count on my armies as well, Lord Marak," declared Lord Quilo. "You not only won the heart of Emperor Bagora, but my son as well. I respect Katzu more than I respect myself. You have just shown your true intent by rejecting vows from Lord Chenowith. I was merely waiting for some sign that your ambitions were truly for the good of Khadora and not yourself. You have provided that proof as Katzu knew you would."

"Lord Kiamesh?" Lord Patel prompted with a grin on his face.

"You know me well enough, Patel," smiled Lord Kiamesh. "As long as I do not have to offer vows to Lord Marak, there is little for me to think about. My armies will march for the good of Khadora. I, too, will offer up thirty cortes. I will endeavor to get them ready as soon as possible. Our combined armies will be as the heart of Khadora. We shall pump strength into those areas that need it."

"We will still be badly outnumbered," smiled Lord Chenowith, "but no longer are the Jiadin guaranteed victory. Let us show the rest of the country what the future of Khadora looks like. We shall be a nation where clans can work together to help one another."

Chapter 29

Lord Jamarat

"Yargot," complained the marshal, "have you no say in what Aakuta does? These Jiadin are savages. They trample our fields and abuse our women. They devour the food so quickly that we will run out of it before long. The Kamaril clan will be penniless within a fortnight."

"Aakuta is lord of the Kamaril clan," declared Yargot. "Without him, we would no longer be a clan. Never forget that he saved my life. How can I complain when his men eat our food?"

"He saved your life, but he was well paid for it," argued the marshal. "Letting him ruin the estate is not serving your people well."

"I gave my word to him," Yargot said adamantly. "Would you serve a lord whose word means nothing?"

"No," conceded the marshal, "but surely you can talk to Aakuta and make him see what these filthy Jiadin are doing?"

"You should be careful of your criticisms of the Jiadin," warned Yargot. "They do not appear to need much provocation to strike out at us."

The Kamaril marshal nodded dutifully and sighed in exasperation. He turned and walked out of the room. Yargot also sighed and shook his head. While he had to justify Aakuta's actions to his people, he also had great concerns for the welfare of the Kamaril people. He summoned up his courage and walked to the meeting room which Aakuta had taken over as his own.

"More complaints?" Aakuta asked without turning to face the door. "Why do you Khadorans whine so much? Do you begrudge the Fakarans the pleasantries you have taken for granted for so long?"

"Must they try to make up for their lack of it all in one day?" quipped Yargot. "An estate is the culmination of generations of hard work. Your Jiadin can tear it down in a fortnight. Can you not talk of moderation with them?"

"You are bold for one so young," chuckled Aakuta. "While I am capable of controlling the Jiadin, I choose to allow them the simple luxuries of life before they die, which will be soon. Continue to appease your people, young Yargot."

* * *

"There are great armies heading eastward, Mirakotto," reported Lord Garic. "The Walkan, Scratti, and Organila armies clog every

major road. I think they are heading out to aid Lord Oktar."

"You will address me as Emperor," snarled Mirakotto. "Have you no respect for my position?"

"I am sorry," bowed Lord Garic. "You are indeed the Emperor of Khadora."

"And don't forget it," snapped Mirakotto. "It is not Lord Oktar that they seek to assist. It is Lord Marak. Something must be done about him."

"I thought you had that taken care of?" questioned Lord Garic.

"Andretti was a fool," spat Emperor Mirakotto. "We need someone who is close to the Torak lord. He must be caught off guard."

"Just the mention of assassinating him to the wrong person will cause trouble," frowned Lord Garic. "We dare not approach a member of the Torak clan. Who else could have close enough access to him to strike a fatal blow?"

"That is what you must find out, Lord Garic," ordered the Emperor. "Find someone to deal with Lord Marak, and find him quickly."

* * *

Lord Oktar joined Lord Marak on the tall hill overlooking the Balomar estate.

"There are so many of them," frowned Lord Oktar. "We can never hope to hold them off. Marshal Berman said they began arriving a couple of days ago."

"They must have had orders before the Assembly of Lords," sighed Lord Marak. "It is as I suspected. You can see the Vessi coming in from the north and the Lejune from the south. There is little doubt to their intentions. They plan to annihilate everyone on the Balomar estate. It is time to move your people away from here."

"How?" asked Lord Oktar. "And where will they go?"

"There are wagons arriving everyday with food from my estates," Lord Marak pointed out. "Start filling those wagons with people for the return trip. The wagons will become more numerous now that we have convinced several other clans to send armies here. They must be fed as well."

"I am still amazed that you managed to convince them to send troops," Lord Oktar said. "When will they arrive?"

"Soon, I hope," replied Lord Marak. "Great armies cannot move with the speed of a single squad. They should start arriving in a few days."

"Will a few days be soon enough?" questioned the Balomar lord. "The Jiadin must be close to ready for their attack."

"Army to the west," announced Botal. "This may be trouble. It is not one that we are expecting."

Lord Marak turned around and squinted into the setting sun. The distance was great, but he was able to make out the colors of their banner.

"Neju," frowned Lord Marak. "What are they doing out here?"

"Lord Woton was a close ally of Mirakotto's," interjected Gunta. "We should alert our troops to be ready for mischief."

"Lord Jamarat is easily swayed," nodded Lord Marak, "but I did not think he would allow Mirakotto to use him again. I wonder why Latril has not given me some advance word of this movement?"

"Perhaps she was not able to," frowned Botal. "Shall I ride out to meet them?"

"We all shall," decided Lord Marak. "If he has come to aid the Jiadin, we are in grave trouble. I would prefer to talk him out of it before his troops are committed."

"He could attack you instead," warned Lord Oktar. "I think you going to meet him is not wise."

"Lord Jamarat is simple-minded," declared Lord Marak, "but I do not think his heart is black. He will not act dishonorably."

Lord Marak gave the signal to head back to the mansion and onto the road to Khadoratung. Botal led the squad down the hill. His hand signals when he reached the bottom of the hill alerted the Torak troops there to potential danger. The word spread quickly as soldiers of each clan prepared for battle.

An hour later, the Torak squad halted in the middle of the road to Khadoratung. The vanguard of the Neju army halted. Lord Marak rode slowly forward towards the Neju. Halman and Gunta followed as visible shadows. Suddenly, the ranks of the Neju parted. Lord Jamarat, sitting proudly atop his warhorse started forward. Latril rode right behind him. The soldiers sat in silence as the two lords approached one another.

"Greetings Lord Jamarat," welcomed Lord Marak. "What brings you to the eastern frontier?"

"You do, Lord Marak," answered the Neju lord. "I understand that Latril has sworn Vows of Service to you. I wish those bonds to be broken."

Lord Marak frowned as he tried to gaze at Latril, but she was blocked from his vision by the hulk of Lord Jamarat. Lord Marak raised his eyes and gazed into the face of Lord Jamarat.

"Her bonds to me are for her protection," he declared. "Does she wish these bonds to be broken?"

"She does," nodded Lord Jamarat.

"Then I shall absolve her of her vows on one condition, Lord Jamarat," Lord Marak said. "You will vow to provide for her protection. Without your vow, I will not release her."

“You are a wise man,” grinned Lord Jamarat. “Latril said you would do what you have done.”

“May I ask why you desire the vows broken?” questioned Lord Marak. “And why have you felt that an army was required to ensure that they were broken?”

“The vows were in the way of our betrothal,” grinned Lord Jamarat. “I cannot marry a woman who owes allegiance to another lord.”

“No, that would not be practical,” grinned Lord Marak. “I am very happy for both of you. May Kaltara bless your union.”

“I do not know this Kaltara,” frowned Lord Jamarat, “but your blessing will do. The army is not to force you into giving up Latril. It is our gift to you to help deal with the Jiadin. Treat them well and return them whole.”

“I shall do my best,” responded Lord Marak, “but that is not something that I can promise. A good many of your men may die.”

“I have brought twenty cortes with me,” frowned Lord Jamarat. “That is more than enough to even the odds against the Glamaraldi.”

“We no longer face just the Glamaraldi,” explained Lord Marak. “The Vessi and Lejune clans are gathering against us at this very moment. I suspect the Pikata will join with them soon. There will be between three hundred and four hundred cortes against us here.”

“Mercy!” frowned Lord Jamarat. “I should have brought more men.”

“There are other armies on the way from the Imperial Valley,” offered Lord Marak. “The Walkan, Organila, and Scratti clans are sending close to ninety cortes. We will give the Jiadin a battle that they will never forget.”

Lord Jamarat turned and waved Latril forward. Lord Marak saw the glow of love on her face, and he smiled at her. Lord Jamarat looked down at Latril and smiled.

“I cannot leave my men to battle against such great odds without me,” he said to Latril. “I know we spoke of returning home, but I cannot. I must stay and fight. I will arrange an escort to take you back.”

“I am not leaving,” Latril said adamantly. “If you are to stay, then I will stay by your side.”

“You do not understand,” Lord Jamarat shook his head. “This will be war. It is no place for women.”

“You promised that you would listen to my advice,” Latril said stubbornly. “I am quite capable of taking care of myself in battle. You lead your men, and I will battle as I know how to. We shall compare the piles of dead Jiadin when the battle is over.”

Lord Marak could not suppress his chuckle as he watched the

lovers argue. “Let us get your men settled in, Lord Jamarat,” he interrupted. “Then the three of us can sit and discuss the need for you and Latril to go into battle.”

* * *

The merchant slipped away from his wagon on the Ronan estate. He slid around the corner of the mansion and pressed his back to the barracks that the two officers had just walked into. He hoped to hear the rest of the conversation they had been having as they waled past his wagon. He moved silently along the wall of the barracks until he was underneath one of the windows.

“I doubt the general will live up to his end of the bargain,” said the first officer. “The Omungans do not value honesty as Khadorans do. Theirs is a culture of deceit.”

“It is hardly our decision to make in any event,” responded the second officer. “Lord Garic has the final say in these things. He appeared to view General Didyk skeptically. I say we just wait and see what happens.”

“What have we here?” scowled a low voice from behind the merchant as a sword was extended towards the merchant’s neck. “Spy in the compound,” the voice shouted.

Suddenly, the air was rent with dozens of voices shouting and the trampling of many feet. Fisher soon found himself the center of attention in the middle of the Ronan barracks area. He knew that one day he would slip up. It was bound to happen to even the best of spies.

“Take him to Lord Garic,” commanded an officer. “Search him for weapons first.”

A dozen hands immediately converged on Fisher’s body. All of his weapons were found and removed. The searchers gave little care to being gentle, and Fisher ached all over as he was pushed towards the mansion door. Fisher’s mind worked frantically to develop a story that might cause the Ronan lord to spare his life. He knew that he must not let it appear as if he had loyalty to any one clan. The fact that he was a spy was not in question. No merchant would have been where he was found.

Six soldiers shoved Fisher into the meeting room of the estate. They stood guard over him while someone ran to summon Lord Garic. Several minutes later, the lord of the Ronan clan stepped into the room.

“I am told you were caught spying,” accused Lord Garic. “Your life is now in my hands. Tell me what I want to know, and perhaps I will spare you. Who are you working for?”

“I have no one client,” Fisher declared. “I sell information where I think it will bring the highest price.”

“And who is paying you to spy on me?” asked Lord Garic.

“Nobody,” answered Fisher. “At times I pose as a merchant when I have no pressing needs from clients. It pays enough to be worthwhile. My only fault is that I heard two officers talking about an Omungan general. I could not resist trying to get more information. Any talk of Omungans seems to bring a high price.”

“And who would pay for such information?” asked Lord Garic.

“Any of the clans along the border with Omunga,” shrugged Fisher. “They all live in fear that Omunga may one day cross the Kalatung Mountains. I would try to sell whatever I found out to each clan in the southern frontier.”

“Hmm,” muttered Lord Garic as he turned to stare at the wall map. “Have you done business with any clans down there recently?”

Fisher tried to think of something he could reveal without causing any harm. Lord Garic’s questioning seemed not as harsh as he had expected. He wondered why and decided to take a chance.

“Not in the spying business,” answered Fisher, “but I did have some lucrative business with the Torak clan. It did help me to establish a relationship there that would allow me to sell information.”

“And what lucrative business did you have with Lord Marak?” asked Lord Garic.

“I purchased his mother from the Situ clan and sold her to Lord Marak,” grinned Fisher. “He paid handsomely. I do think he has more gold than he knows what to do with. If I could learn about Omungans, he is the one I would approach first.”

“Would he grant you a visit?” Lord Garic questioned skeptically.

“Certainly,” Fisher nodded vigorously. “He could not thank me enough for getting his mother. Even though he paid a great deal, he acted as if he still owed me something.”

Lord Garic waved his hand to dismiss the soldiers guarding Fisher. He waited until they had exited the room and closed the door.

“Sit,” commanded Lord Garic. “I want to know more about you.”

Fisher sat as he was told to. He waited expectantly for Lord Garic to speak, but the Ronan lord appeared deep in thought for some time.

“Do you have any weapons skill?” Lord Garic finally asked.

“Of course,” frowned Fisher. “No man can survive for long without being able to defend himself.”

“What do you think of Lord Marak?” asked Lord Garic as he switched thoughts faster than the runoff from a spring storm.

“Think?” echoed Fisher as his mind whirled with questions of where this all was leading. “He is a lord. I treat him with respect as I would any lord. I seek to gain clients whenever I can.”

“I understand that,” Lord Garic snarled with impatience. “What

do you think of the man? Do you like him?"

"Like him?" Fisher repeated. "I have no reason to like any man, Lord Garic. I seek only clients, not friends. What Lord Marak does is his business, and what you do is yours. I do not take sides in disputes. Politics is not my game."

"That is good for you," smirked Lord Garic. "A wrong answer to that question would have ended your life. What is your name?"

"I am called Fisher," the spy admitted knowing that if he gave another name and was betrayed by anyone who knew him, he would die instantly.

"Well, Fisher," asked Lord Garic, "have you ever killed a man?"

"On occasion," admitted Fisher as he wondered if Marshal Chack had informed the Emperor of the details surrounding Andretti's death. "I only do so when my life is threatened."

"Would you kill a man if I could promise you riches beyond your wildest imagination?" questioned Lord Garic.

"I have a rather large imagination," grinned Fisher as he began to see a way out of his predicament. "How well guarded is this man?"

"He is well guarded," admitted Lord Garic. "I am not offering such a large amount for an easy task. You will be hunted down after the assassination. Of that I am sure."

"I have many disguises," offered Fisher. "I think I can do it and get away. Who is the man?"

"He is a powerful lord," Lord Garic said vaguely. "That is all you need to know at this point."

"I cannot kill someone who is unknown to me," argued Fisher. "If this man is a lord, then I am anxious to accept the task. I will also forgive the large amount of gold that you are offering. Instead, I want the holdings of this lord."

"Impossible," scowled Lord Garic. "You have no idea what you are asking. One cannot step in and take over a clan. It cannot be done. Only the Emperor could authorize such a thing."

"If this task does not have the Emperor's blessing," frowned Fisher, "I cannot do it. I am a loyal Khadoran, not a man without honor."

Lord Garic stared into space for a long time before shaking his head. "The Emperor would approve of it," he finally said, "but he would never see you. You must trust me that the Emperor would approve. You would be performing a duty of honor for Khadora."

"You are a member of the Lords' Council," pushed Fisher. "I am sure that you have the Emperor's ear. You will be rid of your rival, and it will have cost you nothing. We can all win with this proposal."

"You are bold," frowned Lord Garic. "I doubt you could even pull it off."

“It would be extremely difficult to kill Lord Marak,” grinned Fisher, “but I can guarantee success. I am one of the few people outside of his clan who can get near him in private. You will never find another person to accomplish the task.”

“I never said it was Lord Marak,” frowned Lord Garic. “How did you know?”

“What good would a spy be if he could not discern the simplest of information?” retorted Fisher. “Many people would love to see Lord Marak dead. His rapid rise to the Lords’ Council has caused many to grumble. I also know that there have been recent attempts to kill him. They all failed because they were attempted by someone who does not know him. I know the man. I know his mother. I can get close to him.”

Lord Garic’s eyes brightened as he listened to Fisher. Still, he was skeptical. “How do I know you will perform the task and not try to disappear on me?” he asked.

“Because I want his holdings desperately,” answered Fisher. “No longer will I have to sneak around picking up small tidbits of information to earn a living. I will be a lord of a clan. There is nothing I want more than that. Why would I turn it down?”

“I told you that I cannot promise you the Torak clan,” Lord Garic repeated. “Only the Emperor can disband a clan and allow you to create a new one.”

“Then arrange for me to speak with the Emperor,” insisted Fisher. “I must have his personal guarantee of my payment.”

“Impossible,” Lord Garic shook his head. “He cannot be seen in your company. To do so would be to tie him to your deed. He would never allow that.”

“I said that I am a man of many disguises,” smiled Fisher. “Would he see a merchant, a foreigner, or a priest? I can become any of those instantly. Let me get some clothes from my wagon, and I will demonstrate for you.”

* * *

“Let me tell him,” Latril pleaded with Lord Marak. “He is to be my husband. I do not wish for him to be deceived.”

Lord Marak frowned, but he nodded to Latril. “The time for secrecy is over,” declared Lord Marak. “Soon all of Khadora will know what we have been hiding. Lord Jamarat may as well be the first to know.”

Lord Jamarat looked from Latril to Lord Marak with confusion on his face. Latril took his large hand and held it gently.

“I am a mage,” she said to the Neju lord.

“That does not matter to me,” replied Lord Jamarat. “I love you no matter what you are.”

“I know,” Latril smiled, “but there is more that you do not know. Lord Marak’s people have been training mages for some time now. Some of his mages have discovered new ways to use our powers. We can use our magic in battle.”

“In battle?” echoed Lord Jamarat. “How can magic be used for something other than tending to crops?”

“A number of ways,” interjected Lord Marak. “The primary use is a new means of communication. It allows us to coordinate our armies instantly to react to changes made by the enemy. There are other forms of magic that can disrupt a charge and rain havoc on the enemy’s army. The point Latril is trying to make, Lord Jamarat, is that she is a warrior just as you are. She feels she has a right to be on the battlefield with you.”

“But I want her kept safe,” frowned Lord Jamarat. “I do not want her in battle.”

“The Pikata have arrived,” Botal said as he stuck his head into the room.

Lord Marak rose instantly. “Join with me in a journey to our lookout,” Lord Marak invited Lord Jamarat and Latril. “I will have Latril give you a demonstration of her skills while we view the battlefield.”

Lord Jamarat nodded and led Latril out of the mansion. They mounted horses and rode with Botal’s squad to the top of the hill. Lord Marak gazed across the battlefield as they dismounted. He saw the Pikata banner atop a distant ridge on the other side of the massing Jiadin.

“Latril,” ordered Lord Marak, “weave an air tunnel to the center of that far group of Pikata atop the ridge. Maximum pressure so that we can all hear what they are saying.”

Latril nodded and wove the air tunnel. She adjusted it until she found an interesting conversation. She then adjusted the pressure to allow everyone on the hill to listen in.

“We will hold the Pikata in reserve,” declared the voice of Lord Damirath. “Let the Vessi, Glamaraldi, and Lejune attack them. From up here we should be able to see where they are the least defended. When we find the weak spot, we will exploit it.”

“It will be a bloody battle,” said another voice. “We may need to get more Jiadin warriors when this battle is over.”

“There are plenty of them,” laughed Lord Damirath. “Having Lord Marak gather our opposition on the eastern frontier may actually work to our advantage. We will cripple their greatest armies and still be close enough to Fakara to replenish our forces before we move on to Khadoratung.”

“They are planning on destroying the Imperial Valley,” scowled

Lord Jamarat. “I thought that was only a story so you could get more men.”

“It is not a story,” assured Lord Marak. “That was Lord Damirath you heard speaking.”

“I recognized his voice,” nodded Lord Jamarat. “This magic of yours is wonderful. Can Latril remain up here and listen to their plans?”

“I think it is the perfect spot for her,” grinned Lord Marak. “Perhaps you and I should be up here too. We can make decisions based on what we see and hear, and have Latril relay our commands to the armies below.”

Chapter 30

Battle of Balomar

Lord Marak dressed and left his room in the Balomar mansion. He moved quietly down the stairs and out the front door of the mansion. Lord Kiamesh was standing on the porch staring up at the stars. He turned as the door closed and saw Lord Marak.

"You rise early," greeted Lord Kiamesh.

"Not as early as you," retorted Lord Marak. "Today is the day we test the mettle of these Jiadin. Are your troops ready for it?"

"They are," nodded Lord Kiamesh. "My cortes will guard the road outside the estate. The Jiadin will not use it to get around your defenses. Have no fear."

"Good," smiled Lord Marak. "Remember to keep Jarri near you at all times. She will be your communications link to me. I will keep you appraised of how the battle is going from the hill."

"She will always be by my side," promised Lord Kiamesh. "Their ability to speak over great distances is amazing. You must tell me how this was discovered."

"After the battle," promised Lord Marak. "I want to take one last ride through our defenses before heading up the hill."

Lord Marak mounted his horse and rode off. The Balomar estate had been turned into a natural fortress. Three wide, cleared areas had been cut the length of the estate through the eastern forest. The felled trees were piled in the cleared areas. Wider bands of mature forest separated the cleared strips. Lord Marak rode directly to the outermost cleared strip. As he rode slowly along the cleared strip, couples came out to greet him. Each couple was composed of a female mage and male archer. Lord Marak's conversations were generally the same for each couple. He warned them that the battle would begin in a few hours. He asked if they understood their tasks, and they assured him that they were ready.

When Lord Marak reached the end of the fortifications, he turned inward until he was well past the innermost cleared strip. A series of trenches ran the length of the estate. Here resided the bulk of the Khadoran army. The squad leaders were just awakening the men as he rode by. He smiled and greeted the men, offering words of encouragement as they prepared for a day of battle. The men were nervous, but they tried not to let Lord Marak see it.

A warm feeling ran through Lord Marak as he reviewed the

troops. The men were nervous, but optimistic. They showed a kindred spirit with one another regardless of the uniform they happened to be wearing. They were a unified army fighting a common foe.

Lord Marak gazed skyward and saw the first lightening of the sky. He had spent several hours reviewing the fortifications and knew the battle would begin soon. He quickened his pace and rode to the top of the hill. Already gathered at the summit were the other clan lords and a group of twenty air mages.

"Lord Marak," greeted Lord Chenowith. "On the ride here I tried to visualize what four hundred cortes would look like if they were assembled in one place. My imagination was not as grim as reality. I fear the troops that we brought will have proved to be too little."

Lord Marak turned his gaze to fields just beyond the border of the Balomar estate. Whatever crops had been grown there had been trampled to dust by the arriving Jiadin. The fields were packed with mounted Fakaran warriors as far as he could see in either direction. High on a ridge on the other side of the trampled fields were the Pikata Jiadin.

"There are a lot of them," nodded Lord Marak, "but that alone will not allow them to win. Our people are ready for them. I just spent a few hours reviewing the troops. They are ready."

"Do you really think we have a chance?" asked Lord Quilo. "The Jiadin are on horseback and our men are on foot. They could just race past our defenses."

"We have a few surprises planned for them," smiled Lord Marak. "They will find their ability to trot to the Balomar mansion slightly hampered."

"The mages?" questioned Lord Patel.

"Yes," answered Lord Marak. "Our mages will not be expected. The one fear that I have is Zygor. From what I have heard, he is a powerful magician. Whatever part he plays in this battle will probably surprise us. I do not know what to expect form him. I can only hope that our surprise is more effective than his."

Lord Marak gazed at the distant Fortung Mountains. The first glint of the sun was swiftly approaching the peaks. His eyes dropped to the gathered Jiadin and saw them forming ranks.

"They are coming," declared the Torak lord. "Mages gather around me."

The twenty air mages formed a semicircle around Lord Marak and immediately wove air tunnels to the areas that they were to communicate with. Lord Marak nodded appreciatively as he kept his eyes glued on the Jiadin.

"The attack is starting," Lord Marak announced loudly. "Get ready to defend."

His words were instantly conveyed to the troops below. Lord Marak's eyes focused on the center of the defense. He could barely pick out the mage and her archer as they stepped into the forest along the border of the estate.

The Jiadin charged across the entire front, the air ringing with their shouts to charge. The fields thundered with thousands of hooves beating the ground. Suddenly, large felled trees started rolling towards the charging Jiadin. Even as the lead riders prepared to vault over the rolling trees, the logs leaped into the air. Horses and riders fell to the ground as the trees swept onward. The charge faltered as the Jiadin tried to avoid the flying trees.

Suddenly, the air was rent with thunderous claps of thunder. Lord Marak watched in horror as bolts of lightning flashed down from the sky, striking the easternmost strip of forest. The Torak lord saw a mage and archer fly through the air as a bolt struck their position.

"Mercy!" screamed Latril. "What was that?"

"They have magic of their own," frowned Lord Jamarat.

Lord Marak's eyes rose to the far ridge. He saw Lord Damirath standing with his hands high in the air. More lightning streaked downward as he watched the Pikata lord.

"That is Zygor," declared Lord Marak, "although most people would now call him Lord Damirath. Pull back to the next position," he said loudly into the air tunnels.

Lord Marak watched as the forward mages and their archer escorts turned and raced across the first cleared strip and disappeared into the forest. The Jiadin reformed cautiously. Their horses were skittish from the lightning, and it took a while for them to regroup. The lightning ceased and the battlefield grew quiet. When they did reform, the charge was uncoordinated and sporadic. Some groups charged forward while others were still regrouping. The charging Jiadin leaped over the logs and fallen bodies. They shouted loudly as they charged into the trees in search of the enemy.

As the vanguard of the Jiadin gained the cover of the woods, the trees surrounding them began to explode. Hundreds of water mages worked feverishly to expand the tree saps and time the explosions to cause the most damage to the Jiadin. Flying splinters, large and small, hurtled into the Jiadin horsemen and their mounts. Great trees toppled and fell as their trunks disintegrated in a flurry of bursting wood. The few Jiadin that had managed to race through the fury of the forest were felled by arrows as they tried to cross the outermost cleared strip.

"I cannot believe my eyes," stated Lord Chenowith. "Who would have believed that our mages were capable of such feats? You could have walked this army through each and every clan of Khadora, Lord

Marak. Nothing could have stopped you."

"I am not out to conquer," replied Lord Marak. "I do not even care to kill these Jiadin. They could be useful to use when the real battle begins."

The lightning strikes started again as Lord Damirath focused on the new location of the Torak mages. The Jiadin retreated to regroup, the outer band of forest completely gone. Lord Marak frowned as Lord Damirath peppered the defenses with his lightning bolts.

"Pull back some more," Lord Marak said into the air tunnels.

"We are giving up ground rapidly," frowned Lord Patel.

"Too rapidly," agreed Lord Marak. "The mages were meant to eliminate a great many of the Jiadin, but we cannot afford to lose them to Lord Damirath's lightning. Worse, when our mages are out of the way, he will be free to bring that lightning down on our armies. We must find a way of stopping him."

"There are still two cleared areas that they must get across," Lord Quilo pointed out. "Plus we have the trenches. We at least have some time to think of an alternate strategy."

Lord Marak turned and signaled Botal to approach. "Take your squad out of here," instructed Lord Marak. "Try to work your way around the Jiadin without being seen. Do nothing foolish, but if you see an opportunity to attack or distract Lord Damirath, do it."

Botal nodded and gathered his squad together. Lord Jamarat frowned as he watched the small group of men leave.

"One squad cannot penetrate his defenses," said Lord Jamarat. "Let me take my cortes out of battle and work my way towards this Lord Damirath."

"A small group has the best chance of getting anywhere near him," Lord Marak shook his head. "Besides, your men will be needed here shortly. As soon as the Jiadin clear the trenches, this will become a very bloody battle for us. Every man will be needed then."

"Here they come again," announced Lord Patel.

Lord Marak watched as the Jiadin raced across the area that had been a forest a few moments ago. Once again great logs from the cleared strip rolled towards them and took to the air. As soon as the first logs slammed into the charging Jiadin, the lightning strikes began anew. The Jiadin charge did not falter this time. The horsemen tried to dodge the flying logs and leap over those who had not been successful. They raced across the destroyed woodlands and the cleared strip. As the Jiadin entered the next band of trees, the air mages turned and ran, even as the water mages began to expand the tree saps.

The trees exploded in a rippling fashion starting at the far edge of the woods as the air mages tried to stay ahead of the destruction.

Hundreds of Jiadin were struck down in the explosions and finally the charge halted and retreated.

“One more band of trees and it is time for the trenches,” frowned Lord Quilo. “They do not care how many men they lose. The next charge will not falter.”

“More Jiadin are arriving,” pointed Lord Jamarat.

Lord Marak’s eyes followed Lord Jamarat’s extended arm to the north. On the distant ridge that Lord Damirath occupied, thousands of Jiadin warriors were forming ranks near the north end.

“These ones have not even bothered to wear the uniforms of a clan,” remarked Lord Patel. “There is just something red around their necks.”

“The red scarves of the Jiadin,” commented Lord Marak. “How many do you estimate?”

“Too far to tell,” Lord Jamarat squinted into the rising sun. “Thousands at least, but I cannot estimate them.”

“It hardly matters how many,” sighed Lord Quilo. “There are already enough Jiadin to defeat us.”

“The battle has not yet started,” rebuked Lord Patel. “Lord Marak’s defenses are sound. Even after they clear the trenches, they will have a battle on their hands. Their horses will be no advantage then, and our soldiers are well trained.”

“This battle is far from over,” agreed Lord Marak. “My hope for few casualties appears to be futile, but we will prevail. We must.”

“Here they come again,” remarked Lord Jamarat.

Lord Marak focused on the charging Jiadin. He watched the horsemen charge over the destroyed woods, the cleared strip, and the newly destroyed woods before the flying logs once again began to smash into them.

“Look at the ridge,” urged Latril. “Something there doesn’t make sense.”

Lord Marak tore his eyes away from the charging Jiadin and focused on the far ridge. The red-scarfed Jiadin were racing along the ridge to engage the Pikata warriors.

“They are attacking each other,” remarked Lord Marak as he continued to watch in amazement.

The Pikata horsemen reacted slowly to the unexpected attack. The horsemen had been at rest watching their brethren below attack. They now scrambled to mount a defense even as the first of the Jiadin reached the closest Pikata soldiers. Lord Damirath spun and faced the attackers. He started to rain lightning down on them, but the ground at his feet erupted into showers of dirt as lightning struck all around him.

“There is another mage,” pointed Lord Patel.

Lord Marak's eyes swept to the northern extreme end of the ridge. He could barely make out a figure dressed completely in black. The mage's arms were extended upwards as he called lightning from the sky.

"Aakuta," Lord Marak said under his breath. "What is the dark mage doing in all of this?"

"Whatever he is doing," offered Latril, "he is aiding our side."

"Perhaps for now," nodded Lord Marak as he watched the red-scarfed Jiadin clash with the Pikata warriors, "but I cannot help but wonder what his real goal is. Mages, direct your air tunnels towards the center of the charging Jiadin below us. Maintain the spread that you currently have. I want my voice to be heard by as many of the Jiadin as possible. Everyone else remain quiet."

Each air mage nodded when her air tunnel was properly positioned. Lord Marak glanced briefly at the Jiadin below as they entered the last forested strip and the trees began exploding.

"Jiadin," Lord Marak said loudly into the air tunnels, "I am the Torak, ally of the Astor and the free tribes. Your cause is lost. Look to your leader on the ridge behind you. You are being attacked from the rear. You have but one chance to survive. Get yourselves over the Fortung Mountains and live. Stay in Khadora and die. You have one hour before our cavalry starts to hunt you down."

Lord Marak watched as confusion rippled through the ranks of the Jiadin below. The charge had already faltered at the last strip of destroyed woodlands, and the Jiadin had started to regroup. Many of the riders turned and gazed up at the ridge. They pointed and shouted loudly. Lord Marak did not need to hear their words. He knew they were wondering what to do. They could continue to attack Balomar, go to the aid of the Pikata, or flee. At the moment, the red-scarfed Jiadin were destroying the Pikata. Lord Marak decided to help them decide.

"Do not waste your hour," he shouted into the air tunnels. "Our armies are well rested and fresh. You are not. If we catch you in between our cavalry and our Jiadin allies, you will all die."

Lord Marak made a motion for the mages to drop the air tunnels.

"Our allies?" questioned Lord Jamarat. "Do you mean those with the red scarves are on our side?"

"I have no idea who they are," Lord Marak admitted, "but it doesn't hurt to make these false Khadorans believe that they are in danger of dying. At the moment, the red scarves appear to be our allies. That is good enough for me."

"What was that about the Astor and the free tribes?" asked Lord Quilo.

"That is a long story that I promise to share with you when this is

over," answered Lord Marak as he watched the milling Jiadin arguing with each other.

"Some are fleeing!" shouted Latril. "Look!"

Hundreds of Lejune warriors turned and started galloping away to the south. As their departure created a void in the milling Jiadin, others turned and followed them. Within minutes, thousands were leaving the battlefield. Lord Marak's eyes rose to the distant ridge. The Jiadin and Pikata warriors were so intermingled that it was impossible to tell who was winning. The two mages continued their lightning strikes against each other, oblivious to the battles raging around them.

"Latril, open an air tunnel to Jarri," commanded Lord Marak. "Lord Jamarat, I want you to organize your men as cavalry."

The Neju lord nodded and when Latril had an air tunnel open to Lord Kiamesh, Lord Marak continued, "The Neju and Scratti will follow the retreating Jiadin to make sure they keep heading eastward. Do not engage them as long as they are heading to Fakara. If they try to turn north or south, attack them. The rest of our men will mount up and follow behind you. If you get into trouble, we will be there to bolster your forces."

* * *

The Jiadin bodies surrounding Aakuta were beginning to pile up. He glanced briefly at them and inhaled deeply as his feelings of power grew. He gazed across the ridge to where Lord Damirath stood. He watched the wizard's arms rise high and then felt the lightning bolt glance off his shields. Aakuta waited. He did not bother with returning a lightning bolt at his adversary. He waited patiently and timed his move perfectly.

As Lord Damirath's hands started skyward again, Aakuta swiftly cast a different spell aimed at the Pikata magician. The move caught Lord Damirath by surprise, as the shields protecting him turned a frosty blue. Aakuta smirked as he cast the next spell. A loud ringing echoed across the valley as Lord Damirath's frozen shields shattered. The Pikata mage looked with astonishment towards Aakuta as he saw the incoming lightning bolt. There was no time for Lord Damirath to react. The lightning bolt blasted into his body, smoke rising in a spiral above him. The uniform that Lord Damirath had been wearing fluttered in the wind and fell to the ground, the body that it had covered was gone.

The Jiadin in Pikata uniforms had seen the magical display of power. Shouts rang out as they began to retreat from the charging Jiadin. Aakuta watched without emotion.

"They are running from the fight," reported Werner as he rode up alongside Aakuta. "Do we chase them?"

Aakuta looked down at the fields where the other false Khadoran

clans were already fleeing the battlefield. He shook his head slowly.

"No," Aakuta said. "This battle is over. It is time to retreat and plan for the next battle. Gather the men and return to the Valley of the Ram."

"Not to the Kamaril estate?" questioned Werner. "You are going there alone?"

"The Kamaril no longer interest me," shrugged Aakuta. "They should not interest you, either. Come closer to me."

Werner moved hesitantly closer. Aakuta reached out and placed his hand on Werner's forehead. Werner shivered with fear.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I am removing certain things from your mind," Aakuta said dispassionately.

"Why?" trembled Werner. "I have served you faithfully. Have I done something wrong?"

"I have no further use for your services," declared Aakuta. "Tell our Jiadin that their services are no longer required."

"Then you are not coming back to the valley," Werner finally realized. "Where will you go?"

"That is no concern of yours," answered Aakuta. "Zygor has failed. That is what mattered to me. Lead the men directly to the valley with haste. Do not let the Khadorans catch you. If I have need of you in the future, I will let you know."

Without another word, Aakuta turned and rode away.

* * *

Fisher straightened his uniform as they approached the Imperial Palace. He had wanted to pose as a priest so he could conceal a weapon, but Lord Garic had decided that a one-soldier escort would draw less attention. The Ronan lord had made sure that no weapon was available for the spy.

"Just stay three steps behind me and do not speak," ordered Lord Garic. "If you embarrass me in the Imperial Palace, I will have your tongue cut out."

"I know how to pose as a soldier," promised Fisher.

Lord Garic mumbled under his breath as they approached the door to the Imperial Palace. The Imperial guards nodded politely and opened the door without a word spoken. The halls of the palace were deserted as dusk was several hours past. They marched through the entry foyer and the foyer before the Assembly Chamber. Lord Garic walked straight to the nearest staircase and started ascending the stairs. Fisher maintained the proper distance. He grinned broadly when the light of a torch reflected off of something metal in Lord Garic's waistband. He focused on the area as they passed the next torch and saw the tip of a knife protruding just below the wide belt.

Lord Garic left the stairwell and marched along the corridor to the door of the Emperor's office.

"He is expecting me," Lord Garic stated without emotion.

One of the Imperial soldiers on guard nodded and opened the door to the Emperor's office. Lord Garic swept past the two men and Fisher followed obediently. The door closed behind him. Emperor Mirakotto glanced up momentarily as they entered the room, grunted an acknowledgement of their presence, and then returned to his writing. Lord Garic continued walking across the large room towards the chairs before the Emperor's desk.

Fisher smoothly closed the distance between himself and Lord Garic. Just before Lord Garic reached the chairs, Fisher made his move. He grabbed the hidden knife and pushed Lord Garic forward. Lord Garic stumbled into a chair and fell to the floor. Emperor Mirakotto glanced up with a look of annoyance on his face. His eyes barely had time to register the threat as the knife flew across the short distance and imbedded in his throat. The Emperor's hands rose towards his throat and his mouth opened wide to scream, but the only sound was a timid gurgle. The Emperor's head banged down on his desk. Lord Garic cursed and tried to untangle himself from the chair he had knocked over.

"I am so sorry," apologized Fisher. "I didn't see you stop. Let me help you up."

"I didn't stop," snarled Lord Garic as he took the offered hand. "I warned you not to embarrass me."

"I know," Fisher said with a smile as his fist flashed forward and connected with the Ronan's lord's head.

Lord Garic collapsed and sprawled on the floor. Fisher swiftly hoisted the man's body over his shoulder. He walked to the window and looked out. The city was dark, and he could see no guards on the lawn below. He maneuvered Lord Garic's body to the window ledge and pushed it out. He waited until he heard the telltale thud of the body hitting the ground. He walked over to the desk and picked up the chair. He positioned the chair as it had been earlier and walked to the exit door. He listened carefully for any signs of activity on the other side and smiled when he heard none. He was thankful that the Emperor's office had thick doors to keep outsiders from hearing what went on inside.

Fisher swiftly opened the door, slid out of the room, and closed the door again. The guards immediately turned towards him with questioning glances.

"Lord Garic forgot the papers he wanted to show the Emperor," Fisher shrugged. "Guess who gets the blame for it?"

"Could it be any other way?" chuckled one of the guards. "You

had better hurry with them or he will deride you some more when you return."

"I am in no hurry to return," smiled Fisher. "Those two are arguing as if they were married. I can never get used to being in the presence of two powerful men arguing. It just isn't safe."

"Well I hope he doesn't ring for us then," laughed one of the guards. "I would prefer that you return and take the abuse."

"Thanks a lot," Fisher said sarcastically as he waved goodbye to the guards and headed for the staircase. "I just hope they don't come to blows like they did the last time."

* * *

"Welcome back to Khadoratung, Lord Marak," greeted Katzu outside the Lords' Council Chamber. "I heard that things went well on the frontier."

"Indeed they did," smiled Lord Marak. "The Jiadin have fled back into Fakara. A few groups of them chose to stand and fight, but they proved to be no match for the armies pursuing them. The bodies of the three lords hosting them have been found dead. Nobody is sure if they committed suicide or were murdered by their own people. I don't think anyone really cares as long as they are gone."

"What of Lord Damirath?" asked the mediator. "I heard reports that only his clothes were found. There was no body."

"That is correct," nodded Lord Marak. "Frankly, I am not surprised. I believe the real Lord Damirath died a long time ago. Somehow Zygor found a way to take over his body. There is much about magic that we do not know yet."

"I am sure your mages will soon discover it," smiled Katzu. "What of Aakuta? I heard he actually helped our side in the battle."

"He certainly did," agreed Lord Marak. "I do not know if it was intentional of not, but timing of his arrival was fortunate for us. We were at the point in battle where our losses were about to increase dramatically. There was no sign of his body after the battle. He must have escaped. Some of the fleeing Jiadin spoke of a secret valley in Fakara that was lush with crops and animals. I got the impression that the dark mage was somehow responsible for it. What happened to Mirakotto?"

"That is puzzling," frowned Katzu. "It appears that Lord Garic and he had a falling out. Lord Garic knifed him in the throat. It must have been a spontaneous act, because Lord Garic did eventually realize what he had done. He committed suicide by jumping from the window."

"I cannot say that I am sorry to see the two of them gone," admitted Lord Marak. "They placed their own welfare above that of Khadora. We have no place for such people."

“I agree,” nodded Katzu. “You had better go in. The other lords have already assembled. We can talk later.”

Lord Marak smiled and nodded as Katzu held the door open for him. He entered the chamber and took a seat with the other four lords.

“Now that we are all here,” smiled Lord Patel, “we can begin. Our only point of business today is to select the next Emperor. Let us try to do a better job than the last time. I open this meeting for nominations.”

Each of the lords looked at one another for a few seconds. Lord Marak smiled and stood.

“I nominate Lord Chenowith,” he said. “His father served Khadora well, and I am sure that Bagora’s son will follow in that tradition.”

Lord Chenowith smiled and rose as Lord Marak sat back down. “Thank you, Lord Marak,” he said. “You honor me with your nomination. I cannot accept, however. I think everyone in this room knows who needs to be our next Emperor. While I think each of us could serve this country well, only one of us has the vision of where we need to go. That person, Lord Marak, is you. I nominate Lord Marak to be our next Emperor.”

“My election to Emperor may be a bit too much for the Khadoran lords to stomach,” warned Lord Marak. “I would immediately issue several edicts.”

“What kind of edicts?” asked Lord Quilo.

“I would immediately banish slavery,” answered Lord Marak. “I would demand that all mages be schooled. I believe we will need their magic when the evil comes.”

“I think the lords will have to swallow those reforms,” shrugged Lord Quilo. “Schooling the mages makes a great deal of sense. Nobody fully understands what they are capable of. As for freeing the slaves, it is only an economic matter. If all clans free them, no particular clan will have an advantage. It will be equal for all.”

“I would also freeze all clan boundaries,” Lord Marak continued. “I will not have boundary disputes causing dissention between clans. If there are boundaries that are currently in dispute, they must be presented to the Lords’ Council within a fortnight. The Lords’ Council will decide upon a final boundary in those cases.”

“An excellent idea,” remarked Lord Patel. “Boundary disputes are the number one reason for warfare in Khadora. We should commission a map of Khadora showing each and every boundary.”

“I will want each estate to have their armies trained here in Khadoratung,” added Lord Marak. “They can send two cortes for training and when those two are returned to them, they can send two more. Eventually, we will have trained every army in the country and

taught them how to interact with other armies."

"So when the times comes," nodded Lord Kiamesh, "the various clan armies will be able to act like one."

"Exactly," agreed Lord Marak. "We will also be able to count on each army to have a sufficient level of skill to handle the tasks we assign. There is another reform that I have thought a lot about lately. We need a system of courts in Khadora. When slavery as a punishment is abolished, it will cause a certain amount of confusion as to what is to be done with lawbreakers. We should have courts that will decide the punishment for each crime. No longer will the clan lord be the sole judge of crime and punishment. Each offender will be given a chance to tell his side of the story. The court will decide on guilt or innocence and specify the punishment."

"This is a drastic change in our laws," interjected Lord Chenowith. "Clan lords are used to having the final say in affairs of the clan. There may be riots calling for you to step down."

"Which is why I warn you against electing me," sighed Lord Marak. "I see these edicts as necessary to make Khadora into the country we have always wanted it to be."

"I think the courts could be presented in such a way as to make them appear more favorable," suggested Lord Patel. "Each clan has in their history at least one tale of wrong justice. If the courts are presented as being able to prevent such injustices in the future, I think it will be accepted."

"You might also add that the levying of fines will be a punishment," added Lord Quilo. "A portion of the proceeds can be allocated to the wronged party. Nothing speaks louder to a clan lord that gold."

"Isn't that the truth," chuckled Lord Kiamesh.

"There is one last edict that goes against the very first law of Khadora," Lord Marak frowned. "The Chula are not to be bothered. This will cause an outcry from some clans because they have been led to believe that all of Khadora's woes rest on the shoulders of the Chula. The fact is, the Chula have never attacked us unless we first invaded their lands. This fighting must also stop. As the clan boundaries will be formalized, there will be no reason to invade Chula lands."

"You have presented the reasons why Khadorans have no need to attack the Chula," frowned Lord Quilo, "but what is to stop the savages from attacking us?"

"I will execute a treaty with the Chula," offered Lord Marak. "We will each agree to the boundaries of our peoples. Hopefully, we will soon begin trading between the Chula and the clans, and perhaps in time, we will even learn to trust one another."

“Any other edicts, Lord Marak,” asked Lord Chenowith.

“Not at this time,” sighed Lord Marak, “but I warn you my election will cause problems.”

“There will be problems no matter who becomes Emperor,” declared Lord Chenowith. “I could be easily tempted to take your list of edicts and make them mine.”

“That would please me,” smiled Lord Marak.

“But I won’t,” grinned Lord Chenowith. “They are your edicts, and you should implement them yourself. My nomination of Lord Marak still stands. Are there any other nominations before I call for a vote?”

“There will be no other nominations,” smiled Lord Quilo. “Let’s get this vote out of the way so we can start planning to implement the Emperor’s new edicts.”

“Yes,” grinned Lord Kiamesh, “I can hardly wait to see the faces at the Assembly of Lords when Emperor Marak announces his few small changes. A few of those expressions will be priceless.”

The mood of the Lords’ Council was bright as they voted in the new Emperor. While the meeting officially ended with the election of Emperor Marak, unofficially it continued well into the night. Each of the members of the Lords’ Council began preparing speeches in support of Emperor Marak’s edicts.

The Lords’ Council mediator, Katzu, checked the room periodically. Each time he checked, his curiosity grew as to why the council was still in session. He also wondered why the members were in such a jovial mood. Eventually, he stayed inside the room and listened to what was going on. With a wide grin of understanding, Katzu pulled out a chair and sat down to join in the preparations for a new Khadora.